

PLAYSTATION NOW: HOW SONY PLANS TO STREAM AHEAD
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Alone in the dark with sci-fi's greatest xenomorph
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HAIL TO THE THIEF
THE FIRST NEXT-GEN GAME OF 2014 EMERGES OUT OF THE SHADOW OF DEUS EX
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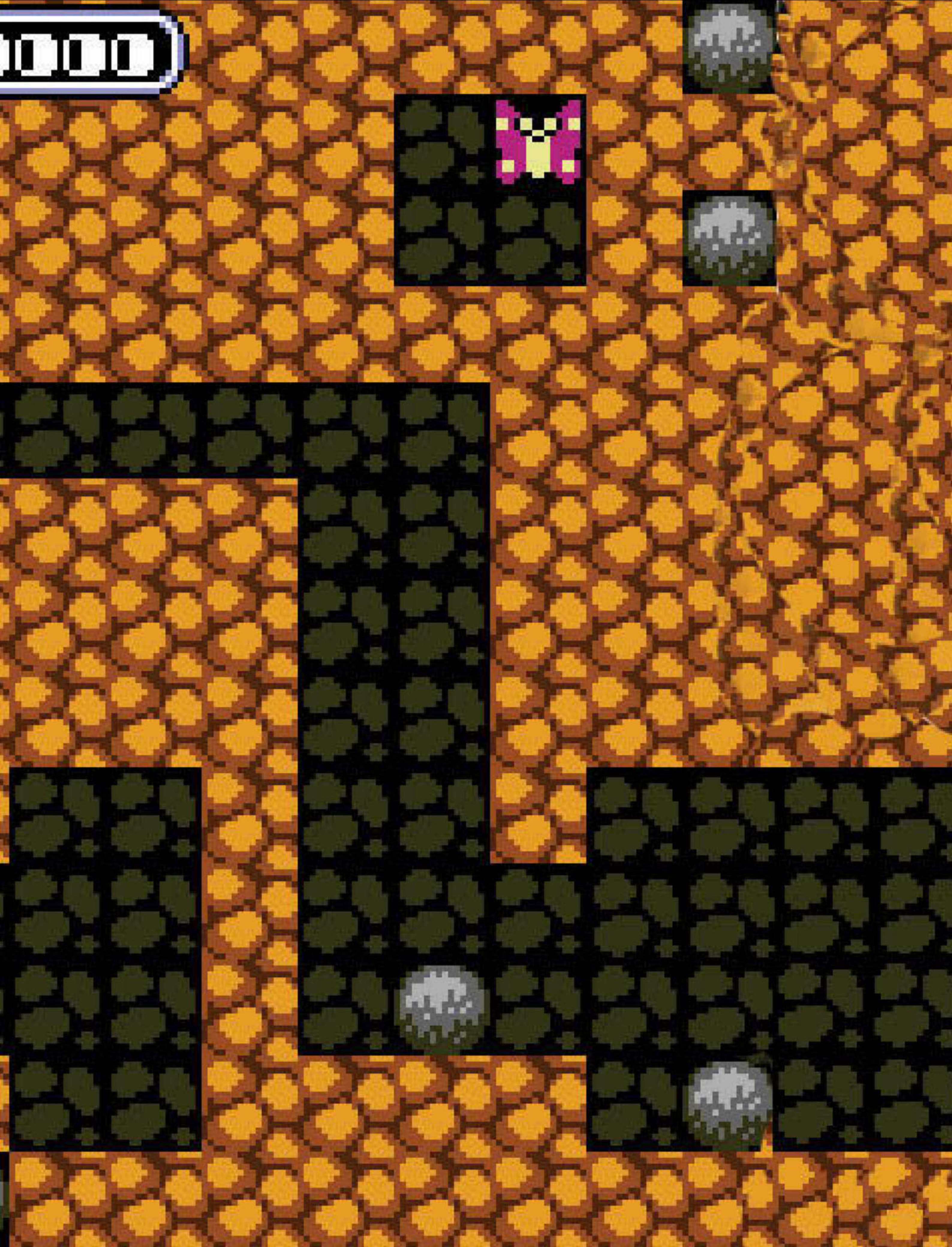
Throughout the period of a game's development it lives almost entirely in the shadows, only very occasionally peeking out from the studio hive to help build speculation and get fans all worked up for its eventual and hopefully not-too-distant release. In the case of the recently announced *Alien: Isolation*, developer Creative Assembly has been cagier than might've been expected, given the vast and enduring popularity of the Ridley Scott movie from which the game takes its inspiration. Then again, given how the UK studio is taking a very different path from historical strategy, perhaps it's wise that the team treads carefully – especially after the nasty scare a year ago caused by the bumbling *Colonial Marines.*

Being the very first next-gen release of 2014, the noise surrounding *Thief* is a little louder. It's been ten long years since the shy and retiring Garrett last stalked PC and Xbox, and with Eidos Montreal on coding duties – previously of course responsible for the welcome return of *Deus Ex* after a similar lay-off – there is no reason to doubt that a new standard for stealth-action gameplay is about to be set, particularly now there's a whole city for the master burglar to hide in.

Alien and *Thief* aren't the only newcomers this issue with form to consider, but that's enough about me. Instead, enjoy the issue. And don't have nightmares.

Richard Shoemaker
EDITOR


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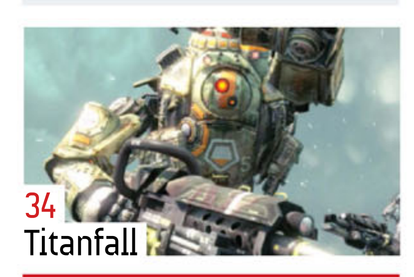
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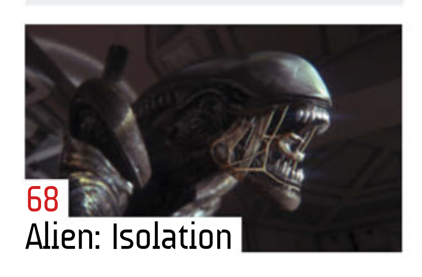
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24 Feature
Heart Of Darkness
We visited Eidos Montreal's studio to take a look at how the developer wants to make players think, act and play like a true master thief
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(DIRECT FEED)

PlayStation Now: Beyond The Next Generation

→ We take a look at Sony's new streaming service and what implications it has on how we will play games in the future

Since it launched just a few short years ago, streaming film and television service Netflix has fundamentally transformed the public's perception of media consumption and forced distributors and retailers alike to readdress the way their businesses operate. In short, Netflix has been a game changer for the entertainment industry. And now it's Sony's turn.

PlayStation Now was announced during Sony's CES conference on 6 January to a rapturous reception, unveiled as the streaming game service built on Dave Perry's Gaikai cloud-based technology that enables users to play PlayStation 3 games instantly through their PS4s, PS Vitas and Bravia televisions.

This, however, is just the beginning. The service is scheduled to start in the US in the summer and will be available on PS3 and PS4 initially, before being rolled out onto other Sony hardware and, in the future, third-party devices.

"Eventually the service will expand beyond PlayStation platforms and Sony devices, allowing users to stream PlayStation games on numerous other internet-connected devices," Sony said in its announcement. "SCE's vision for PS Now is to enable users to instantly enjoy a wide range of full games on the internet-connected consumer electronics devices they use every day."

Below OnLive was the first game streaming service to market in 2011, but it's hardly been a roaring success.



But what does this mean for the player? Well, Sony has proposed a subscription service that would give users access to a catalogue of contemporary and classic titles to be accessed at any time either for a monthly fee or priced for individual rental. Much like Netflix, it would in theory replace the boxed product with an infinite digital library of games easily accessible and streamed directly to your compatible device without downloads.

For now, the initiative is being launched with PlayStation 3 titles, a proposition that will no doubt placate those critical about the PlayStation 4's lack of backwards compatibility on launch. But the more tantalising prospect is the service extending back further into Sony's gaming lineage and offering a vast array of PSone, PlayStation 2 and PSP titles through the generations.

There are concerns though that, after the similarly structured OnLive was a mere blip on the industry radar a couple of years ago, the concept is currently idealistic and impractical due to limited internet speeds in

DATA STREAM → NINTENDO SHARES DOWN 18% AFTER FINANCIAL REPORT REVEALS $336M LOSSES

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> "How much are consumers willing to pay for last-gen titles, some of which they may have previously paid for at retail?"





Inset Eventually, PSone titles will be available to stream.

various territories across the world. Sony has stated that PlayStation Now requires at least a 5Mb/s connection to ensure what it describes as a 'playable experience' for the games available on the service, but admits that there will be concessions, however minor, to the graphical fidelity. Input lag has also been raised as an issue, a concern that's unlikely to be relieved until the results of the closed beta that recently started in the US are known.

IT'S ALSO HARD to pinpoint where exactly this fits into PlayStation's current ecosystem. After all, with the launch of PS4, PlayStation Plus subscriptions have risen by 90 per cent since the launch of the new console – largely due to the requirement of a subscription to play multiplayer games online. Will Sony include that in the standard PS Plus subscription? If so, it's hard to imagine Sony investing the resources to create a robust and productive service. If PS Now will require an additional fee to access, how much are consumers willing to pay for last-gen titles, some of which they may have previously paid for at retail? What's more, where's Sony's incentive to offer some of its higher profile titles for free through PS Plus when PS Now will be trying to attract its own healthy base of subscribers?

Above Naughty Dog's *The Last Of Us* was one of four titles playable on the PlayStation Now demo at this year's CES.

Below The service will initially be available on the PS3 and PS4, but it will extend to the Vita as well as third-party tablets and smartphones.



There's no easy solution on the horizon, ultimately leaving PS Now looking alarmingly like a proof of concept rather than a fully fledged product; one that given time will develop as broadband connections stabilise globally and Sony untangles its multiple console subscription models into something more unified.

More interestingly, the idea points towards what many industry commentators have




GAMES ANALYST MICHAEL PACHTER PREDICTS FEBRUARY PRICE CUTS FOR PS4 AND XBOX ONE



Inset The vast number of potentially compatible devices means PS Now games will be available to many consumers.



predicted for quite some time: the non-console future – the idea that software will be beamed directly into compatible devices, with only peripheral products representing innovations in physical hardware. In that respect, Sony is perfectly positioned to lead the vanguard with its multiple divisions in home entertainment and portable technology – it's hard to imagine Microsoft and Nintendo being capable of competing with such a comprehensive range of devices at Sony's disposal. Imagine a future where televisions, mobile phones and tablets can all, theoretically, just stream the latest games directly to your device without the need of an additional piece of hardware. Convenience is king and Sony has made a huge step towards a more accessible gaming future.

The biggest news within the announcement is that Sony's ambitions aren't just contained to the reach of its own products, hoping to launch the service on third-party devices at some point in the future. "PS Now will allow users to engage in the world of PlayStation, whether they're existing fans or have never owned a PlayStation platform," said Andrew House, president and group CEO of SCE.

THE IDEA OF Sony's impressive catalogue of exclusive titles accessible through a wide range of devices is one that Microsoft and Nintendo will likely take notice of. When **gamesTM** spoke to Ian Livingstone last year, he questioned whether Nintendo should enter the app marketplace and start delving into the archives of its beloved history of properties for release on smartphone and tablet devices: "Hardware has always been a bit of a mug's game," he said in our interview in April 2013. "If you were head of Nintendo, wouldn't you be tempted to say 'Well, forget all this stuff. Let's just put Mario on iPad'?"

But while Livingstone's suggestion can be taken as blasphemy, it makes sense. It could be argued that there is no other company in the industry that has more to gain through offering its gaming catalogue outside of its own native hardware than Nintendo, enabling users to stream a few decades' worth of celebrated titles through a cloud-based service.

Whether not Nintendo or Microsoft take up the challenge and offer a similar competing service remains to be seen. But if Sony's plans with PlayStation Now prove to be successful, then it could reluctantly push both rival companies out of their comfort zone.

For now, Sony has taken the initiative to realise that this could not only bolster the value of the services it already provides across its gaming devices but a way to further expand Sony's reputation with a broader market.

There is another risk tied to the PlayStation Now's concept and that's the disenfranchising of the console itself. Sony has invested significantly into the Gaikai technology and aims for PlayStation Now to make a sizeable impact on the marketplace, and it's not outside the remit of possibility to suggest that new releases could equally benefit from using the service. Then, it becomes a question of whether or not

> "The idea that Sony has put forward has captured the imagination of the entire industry"

Above First-party exclusives like *Beyond: Two Souls* will likely be the highlights of PS Now's catalogue.

Below It may look strange, but PlayStation Now could bring Sony games to Apple platforms.



WHAT THE READERS SAY

Your views on Sony's radical plans for its games-streaming service

"I think PS Now is a pretty good idea in theory, not sure about in practice though with poor broadband in some parts"
@trevorkevorson

"IF IT'S ANYTHING LIKE MY ONLIVE CONSOLE THEN YOU'RE GOING TO NEED A ROCK STEADY CREW 12GB CONNECTION OR I EXPECT THINGS ARE GOING TO GET A BIT MESSY"
Arthur Scroggins



CANDY CRUSH PUBLISHER TRADEMARKS THE WORD CANDY "TO PROTECT PLAYERS FROM CONFUSION"



it makes sense to continue investing millions of dollars in console development when consumers can access the same products through devices they already own.

The reality is that Sony and Microsoft have just sold millions of units each in the few short months since the PS4 and Xbox One launched in multiple territories. Neither would be keen to put aside what is a dedicated portion of the gaming community still clearly passionate about physical hardware and software – Microsoft's reputation suffered around the announcement of Xbox One that took steps towards a digital-only future.

Ultimately, the idea that Sony has put forward has captured the imagination of the entire industry. The possible implications of what PlayStation Now means for how we access games going forward could radically change every facet of how the industry operates today. Right now, Sony has a lot of snags that it'll need to work out, but it's undeniably a major movement in the industry regardless of whether the idea of PlayStation Now won't truly flourish until PlayStation Later.

CES 2014 ROUND-UP

PlayStation Now wasn't the only unveiling to wow attendees at this year's CES in Las Vegas. Here are five other innovations that will impact the world of gaming over the next few years



STEAM MACHINES

Valve took to CES to finally reveal the Steam Machine. Or Steam Machines, rather. Valve is taking on the home console market in a big way. But with a variety of different Steam Machines hitting the marketplace early in the year, there is a risk it will suffer from eschewing the strength of the concept of traditional consoles. Find out more in our in-depth investigation of Steam Machines on page 54.



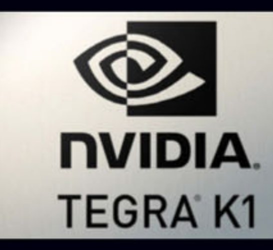
PROJECT CHRISTINE

Pitched as the world's most modular PC design, Razer's Project Christine aims to take the complexity of building and modding a PC out of the equation. The tower is essentially a rack, enabling owners to easily swap components, which Christine's PCI-Express architecture would automatically sync. While the concept is solid, there are few notable concerns, mainly whether or not it'll gain third-party manufacturer support.



LG FLEXIBLE OLED TV

Purported to be the next big innovation in home entertainment, LG's mammoth 77-inch flexible OLED television has a customisable curve to offer viewers the best possible viewpoint of the screen. It's debatable whether such an innovation needs to exist in the first place, but the sheer scale, design and picture on the display is incredibly impressive. Although you can expect the price to be equally as large.



NVIDIA'S TEGRA K1

Nvidia's latest mobile SOC (system on a chip) Tegra K1, is an impressive demonstration the advancement of mobile gaming technology. Revealed running a demo of Unreal Engine 4, both Epic and Nvidia promise the new chip is as powerful as the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 core. The thought of that level of graphical fidelity and high-level performance running on tablets and smartphones in the not-too-distant future is undeniably a tantalising one.



STEELSERIES STRATUS

Another year and another controller appears for iOS gamers, only this one might be worth investing in. The Stratus from gaming peripheral specialists SteelSeries is the first Bluetooth-enabled controller to be compatbile with iOS 7 and boasts compatibility with more than 500 games (including *Grand Theft Auto*), supports same-device multiplayer and offers a decent ten-hour battery life. Costing £85 the controller is available now.

"In general I don't like streaming services as I want to own the games rather than renting them"

@krokounleashed



"I PREFERRED PLAYSTATION THEN"

Mark Reid

"Makes me want a PlayStation 4. Seems inevitable that this is the way things are going. I'm gonna have even more choice anxiety than I have now!"

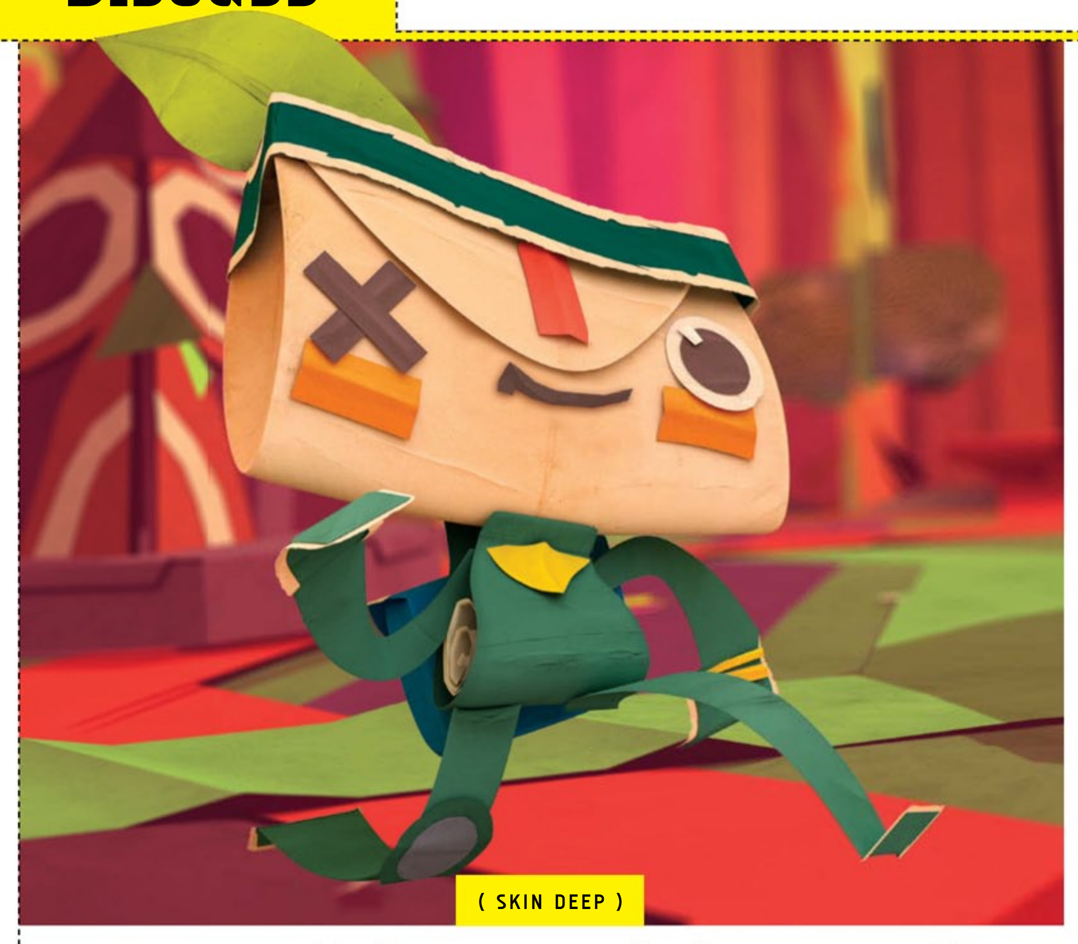
Lester Bang

"NEW GEN IS MORE ABOUT THE SERVICE GAMERS WILLING TO PAY FOR THEN THE CONSOLES THEY CHOOSE TO BUY, SONY BY FAR LEADING THE WAY!"

@CockneyCharmer



DISNEY HAS NO PLANS TO REVIVE STAR WARS 1313 AFTER ALLOWING THE TRADEMARK TO LAPSE



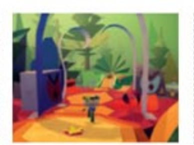
(SKIN DEEP)

Graphics With Style And Substance

→ As triple-A titles move towards increased levels of photorealism, we still keeping seeing retro-styled and cel-shaded games. Why are these developers so keen to paint against the realistic grain?

It could just be because there's a wider games market now – as more and more developers rush to the digital marketplaces to flog their wares, they're going to have to offer more unique products to stand out. We like to think there's something else pushing them, though, something more artistically driven and societally valid – we think people are getting bored of photorealism.

It makes sense, doesn't it? We could probably spend the rest of this page listing off drab, uninspired first-person shooters, all of them lethargically brought to life with sludgy colour palettes and lazy textures. That was the downfall of the last generation – even the biggest and best titles from early on in the PS3/360 life cycles look dated now; *Gears Of War*, *Resistance* and *Call Of Duty 2* all look horrendous compared to their more recent successors. They all went for photorealism – a gritty, dirt-under-the-fingernails approach to graphical communication that looks great at the time, but whose aging is painful to watch.



Above By staying away from uber-realism, developers like Media Molecule can find new ways of presenting games to us – *Tearaway* takes on a papercraft aesthetic, for example.

Look back to something like the original *BioShock* – while it did gun for the best graphics, it also stuck to a very defined art style. Boot it up today and it hasn't aged badly at all. The same goes for old-school games, too – *Crash Bandicoot*, for all intents and purposes, was a cartoon of a game, designed for kids in vivid and exuberant flashes of fluorescent orange and green. Play it now, and it hasn't *lost* anything because of its age. Even some of our favourite games of the last generation – *Fallout 3*, for example – have suffered from the rapidly evolving standards of graphical fidelity.



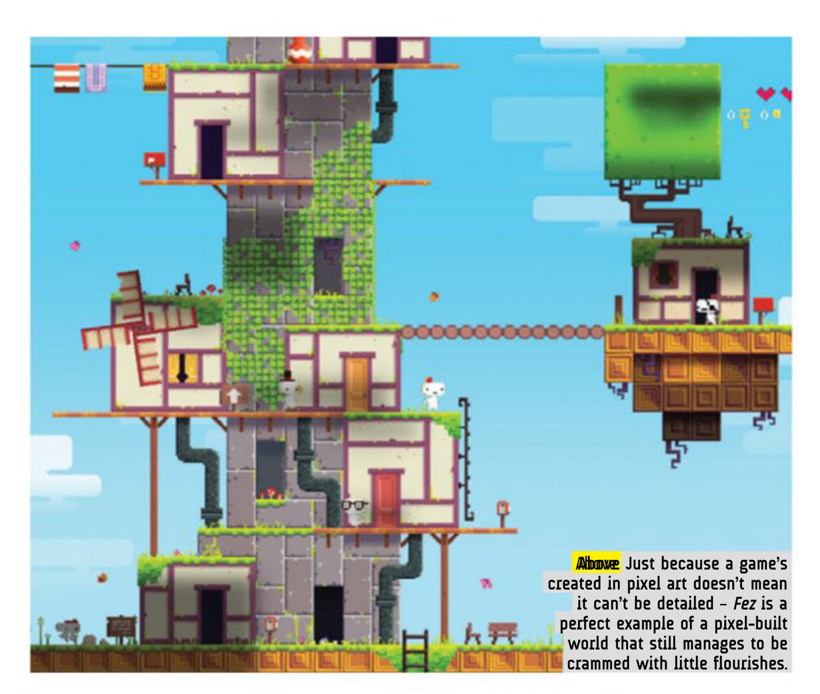
Above We pray we never see a realistic reimaging of *Super Meat Boy*. It'd be beyond horrific.

PERHAPS THAT'S WHY we're seeing such a hunger for games like *Hotline Miami*, *Tearaway*, *Super Meat Boy*, *Fez*, *Limbo*, *Machinarium* and *Journey*. These games prefer art direction and style over realism and powerful engines. *Borderlands* and *The Walking Dead*, too, manage a longevity that other games don't, and this is down to their cel-shaded visual splendour. The benefit in applying a vivid and distinct art style to your game goes beyond aesthetics; it makes your game noticeable – each of the screens that surround this text are identifiable for their content, distinguishable from the other games because of their vibrancy and character. If there were just various shots of *Call Of Duty* or *Battlefield*, *Forza* or *Gran Turismo*, *Far Cry* or *Ryse*, it'd all look good, but oh so vanilla.

You can get away with more when things aren't real, too – sure, survival horrors work when you've got a crunchy reality giving some weight to the scares, but if you really want to tread new ground or deliver a poignant metaphor, what better way of doing it than by travelling the stylistic route? Going back to the PS2, you had *Shin Megami Tensei: Lucifer's Call* (which still resounds with a smooth creepiness due to its understated cel-shading) making hard-hitting holocaust analogies with animated manikins. We don't think that's something that you could pull off so effectively in the

→ NEXT-GEN CALL OF CTHULHU COMING → 3DS BIGGEST-SELLING CONSOLE IN 2013, PS4 FASTEST-SELLING



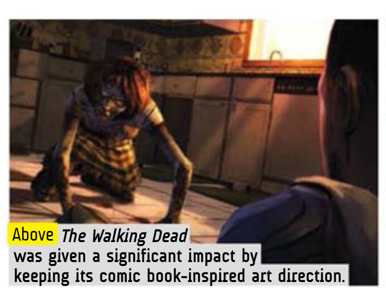

Above Just because a game's created in pixel art doesn't mean it can't be detailed – *Fez* is a perfect example of a pixel-built world that still manages to be crammed with little flourishes.

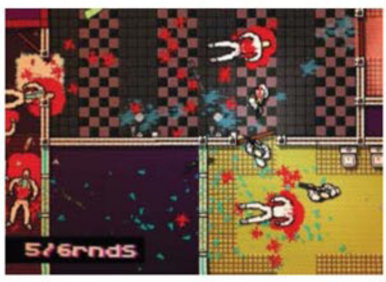
> "[Cel-shading] was definitely a big gamble… We wanted to be distinct, because our game was distinct"
> Scott Kester, Gearbox Software (Borderlands)

photorealistc world of *Assassin's Creed*, for example.

As developers get to grips with the new generation's processing capabilities, we're holding out for a focus on pushing games down a more adventurous path; games offer players a chance of complete immersion, something other forms of entertainment can't achieve so readily. Why waste that ability to get inside our heads on creating worlds we could just step outside and see in our day-to-day lives? *Hotline Miami* gave us a voyeuristic look into a perverse world of *Clockwork Orange*-esque uber-violence. *Borderlands* took us to another planet and let us sniff out the lethal flora and fauna, exhibiting alien ideas we'd never seen before. Even *Spyro The Dragon* took us on a tour of a continent where dragons were becoming the least dominant race of a planet once ruled by dragons.

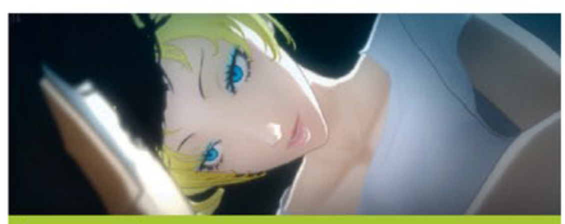
Games can do unique things, show us unique places, have us interact with things we never thought we'd interact with. It's all good booting up *Far Cry 3* and going to crack a shark in the face with our bare fists, but isn't it better booting up *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon* and shooting a neon-blooded dragon through the face with an explosive sniper rifle? Leave the realism at home, and your game will last longer and offer an experience you can't get anywhere else. That is what we want to see the most from the generations of gaming to come.


Above *The Walking Dead* was given a significant impact by keeping its comic book-inspired art direction.



(CEL-U-LIKE)

Cel-shading gives a unique look and style to a title. We believe that these are the most important examples in gaming



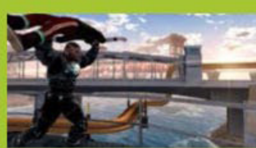
CATHERINE

One of the hardest games of the last generation saw a man fleeing from a dream-invading succubus that fed on the deaths of young men. Somewhere between date-sim and puzzler, *Catherine* is a unique game that we've seen nothing like before or since.



BORDERLANDS

Did you see the tech demo of *Borderlands* before Gearbox decided to cel-shade it? It looked *awful*. The decision paid off – Pandora is stunning and the loot-'em-up gameplay never ceases to entertain.



CRACKDOWN

It's a sad truth, but we'd argue that the last generation killed traditional platformers. Luckily, from the ashes of the genre rose a new kind of game; a sandbox building-hopping platform throwback.



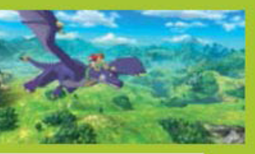
ŌKAMI

Taking cel-shading one step further, *Ōkami* was given the aesthetic of a painting, and this was reflected in the mechanics – requiring you to travel around a region inspired by Feudal Japan and use a paintbrush to paint your way through various obstacles.



JET SET RADIO

The game that started it all off, *Jet Set Radio* was one of the Dreamcast's standout titles, released by SEGA in 2000. The game sadly didn't perform too well, but has since gone on to achieve cult status.



NI NO KUNI: WRATH OF THE WHITE WITCH

RPGs have long been the staple genre of cel-shading, but last year's *Ni No Kuni* managed to fuse the gorgeous visuals of Studio Ghibli with a genuinely fresh take on the JRPG.





VALVE ANNOUNCES COLLABORATION WITH OCULUS RIFT TO ADVANCE VR TECH – NO PLANS FOR STEAM SPECS

(ADDED BITE)

Resurrecting A Monster: Konami Talks Lords Of Shadow 2

→ games™ speaks to David Cox – producer of Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow 2 – about creating an open sequel to appeal to players looking for more than a typical hack-and- slash. With the promise of more exploration and deeper combat, Cox explains how Lords Of Shadow 2 is closer to Zelda than it is to God Of War…

Given the critical success of *Lords Of Shadow*, is the pressure significantly greater this time around?
I think in some ways we felt more freedom this time. There were certain things we wanted to do with the first game, but we didn't do them out of fear. Still, we did change a lot of traditional *Castlevania* things with *Lords Of Shadow*, and those were accepted by a lot of people. This time, because of that acceptance, we thought we'd push the boat out a bit more and let off the shackles.

We're trying a lot of new things with the character and the gameplay. We've made a lot of decisions that has meant we've made a better game this time around. Our vampire is not the Bela Lugosi kind; he's a modern, nasty killer and I think it's really important that we get that across to the audience.

I think it's those new elements that will surprise and appeal to anyone looking for a big action-adventure game. This is much more of an adventure game than a hack-and-slash game, and I think the comparisons made between the first *Lords Of Shadow* and *God Of War* were unfair.

Why go in that direction? Perhaps you would attract a bigger audience by sticking closer to the *God Of War* format…
We wanted to create a game that felt like it belonged in the *Castlevania* franchise; we want to do new things, but not move away from the previous games entirely. *God Of War* is five or six hours of spectacle, but we wanted something closer to a *Zelda* game – with more depth and more to do.

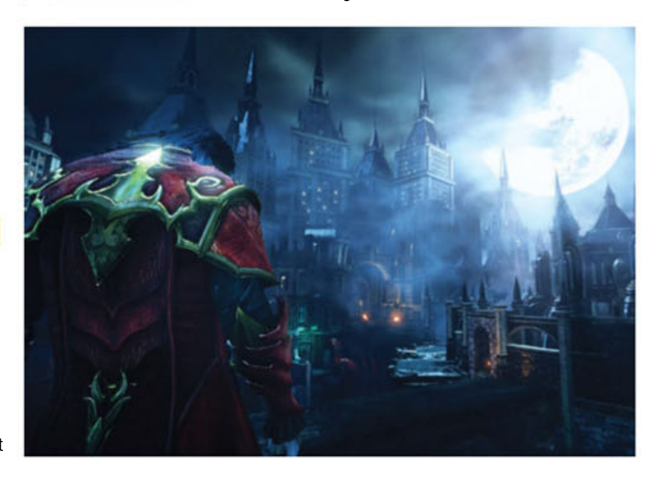
I think with the first game we failed a bit because we wanted to present a full world. We had a world in there, but it didn't feel you fully belonged in it. This time it feels more believable as a living place and that makes you want to explore it. Getting that right was the hardest challenge for us.

The *Legend Of Zelda* comparison is interesting. Is it really as open and as big as a *Zelda* game?
Definitely. In *Zelda* you usually start in a village and then the rest of the world is revealed to you in chunks, it's not for four or five hours that you realise just how big the world is. That's very much what we've done with *Lords Of Shadow 2*, you begin with something linear but the story leads to a point where you can choose to go off and explore at your own pace.

There's a real density of options all throughout the game – that could be a puzzle, enemy combat, a boss fight or a cut-scene to watch. Playing through areas a second time also provides new things to do, as there's nothing worse than backtracking when you're not presented with fresh challenges.

What about those players that enjoy simply hacking the enemy down and not worrying about little details?
If there are players that just want to spam the same button and never mix it up, then this isn't the game for them.

Below The world is a lot darker than the first game, with Castlevania City resembling an even more gothic edition of *Batman*'s Gotham.





TERRARIA FOLLOW-UP STARBOUND SELLS 1M COPIES AFTTER ONE MONTH OF EARLY ACCESS RELEASE



To encourage experimentation we often throw an enemy at you just after you've picked up a new ability, and that enemy will be weak against that ability and allow you to learn how to use it. Again, that's just how *Zelda* works and it's a natural way for players to be rewarded for trying new things.

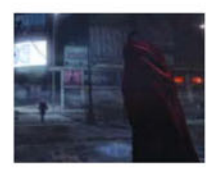
Depending on their level of exploration, will different players see different parts of the story?
Yeah, if you go back and explore an area once you've picked up new skills you may witness a new cut-scene that tells some more of the story. There's nothing worse than going back to an area you've already been to and nothing has changed. Many of those cut-scenes will not be crucial to the story – so you won't find yourself confused if you don't see them, but it will be something new and interesting.

Has the time for another 2D *Castlevania* game passed?
I think those days are gone, yes. I think hardcore gamers would love to play another 2D *Castlevania*, but the reality is that it's a very niche market and Konami really want this series to be mainstream again.

We took this direction in order to reach that bigger audience, otherwise we would have carried on with the 2D approach. That's not to say I don't think there will ever be another 2D game in the series, it might happen but just not from Mercury Steam.

When you look at the future on PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, I don't think people want to play 2D games on those consoles. Core gamers may still want something like that, but there's an expectation among the wider public for big, epic games.

Above A more open world is promised, with players able to return to areas and access new story content.



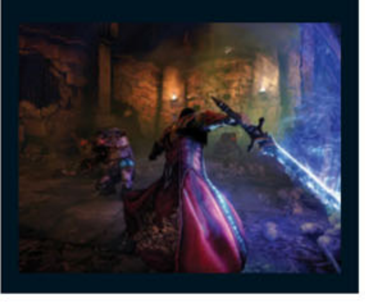
Above Now fully-fledged as Dracula, Gabriel Belmont's image and persona is that bit more morbid than it was in the past.

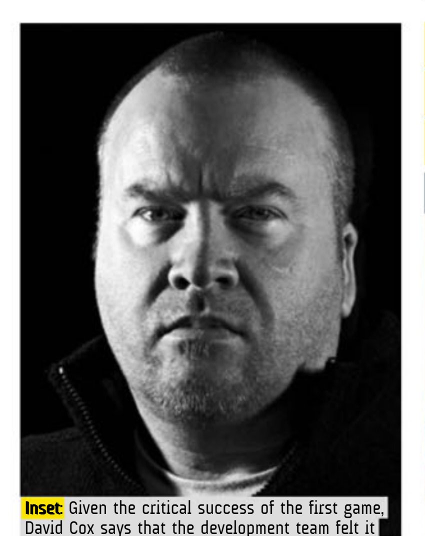
Below Konami was unimpressed with the comparisons between *Lords Of Shadow* and *God Of War*.

THE LAND OF THE FREE

In a bid to allow players to more easily consume the world Mercury Steam has built, *Lords Of Shadow 2* trumps the original by implementing a fully player-controlled camera. This means you can swing the camera around at any angle, at any time – hopefully ridding the game of any blind corners, which can be a nuisance during combat.

The free camera has forced the team to put even more effort into the quality of the world. "With a free camera," explains Cox, "you might look in a certain direction and find something that doesn't look perfect. If that happens the world doesn't seem believable. One of the reasons the game has taken so long to develop is because we needed to get the world to a point that works no matter where the player points the camera."





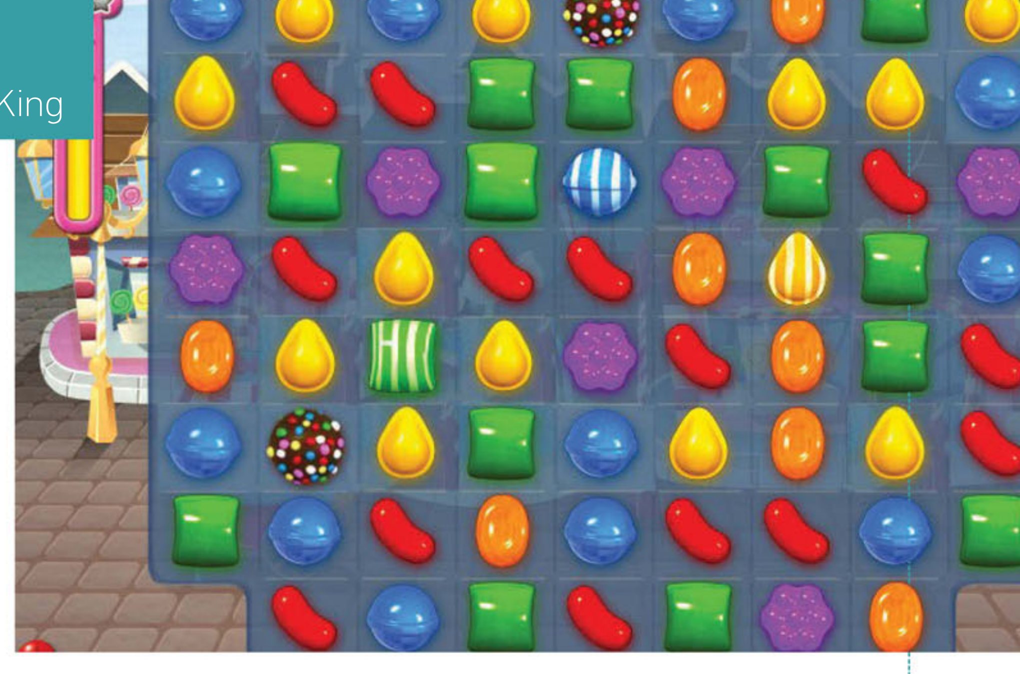
Inset Given the critical success of the first game, David Cox says that the development team felt it has had licence to be more experimental this time.

> "This is much more of an adventure game than a hack-and-slash game, and I think the comparisons made between the first Lords Of Shadow and God Of War were unfair"
>
> David Cox, producer



TELLTALE GAMES' CO-FOUNDER REVEALS DESIRE TO DEVELOP A JAMES BOND ADVENTURE SERIES

#TRENDING
with NowGamer.com's Ryan King



Microtransactions Are Here



The console borders have been breached. Microtransactions are here! Sound the alarms! Nothing is safe. Lock your doors. Lock up your wallets. Lock up your credit cards. Even your consoles!

It was inevitable and we all knew it would happen. We watched from the safety of our console borders, peeking out the curtains as microtransactions ransacked distant Facebook lands, not quite close enough to see their plans in full but wary of the rumblings in the distance. Then microtransactions came for smartphone games and we saw enough to start to fear for the future. *Candy Crush Saga*, seen everywhere from those tapping away on the morning tube to Psy's music videos, draws players in with a free price tag before ramping up the difficulty so the only practical solution to continue is to fork out cash. *Angry Birds* was the smartphone phenomenon before *Candy Crush Saga* turned up but that's surprisingly light on microtransactions – no wonder Rovio came up with the *Angry Birds Go* karting spin-off, including the option to buy a kart for over $100. Ooof.

Publishers like Square-Enix have been carefully testing the model with free-to-play and microtransactions added to their big name IPs, and by carefully, I mean *Final Fantasy: All The Bravest* happened. You might be aware of it but if not, it's a *Final Fantasy* game where you buy characters, swipe across them to attack and that's it. If your character dies, you can either wait three minutes for them to be revived automatically one at a time – if you lose a party of 30 members you have to wait 90 minutes – or you can buy an hourglass to instantly revive them. Awful. The entire thing has been cobbled together as an exercise in microtransactions.



■ *Killer Instinct*'s F2P strategy shows potential.

> We're being asked to trust publishers to do well by us gamers. But why should they? It's a business, after all.

Other publishers have shown a little more tact with their free-to-play and microtransaction experiments – Namco Bandai's *Tekken Revolution* and EA's *Plants Vs Zombies 2* come to mind – but they still seem like the exception rather than the norm. After all, we're being asked to trust publishers to do well by us gamers. But why should they? It's a business, after all. There's been a lot of cynicism in the past about how publishers have introduced measures such as DLC and online passes, and rightly so. Above all, publishers want to make money. So when there are instances such as DLC looking like it was shaved from the final game to be sold separately (Javik in *Mass Effect 3*, on-disc characters in *Street Fighter X Tekken*) and when online passes have been introduced to series that previously didn't have them (*Uncharted 3* and *Tekken Tag Tournament 2*, for example), we're right to be cynical.

It is now the turn of console gaming. What was a gentle prodding of the boundaries, a testing of the waters, has turned into a full-scale flood, with *Forza 5*, *Gran Turismo 6*, *Halo: Spartan Assault* and *Ryse: Son of Rome* leading the way. It's worrying because what was once doing a deal with the devil – free games are okay as long as we can put up with intrusive microtransaction demands – are now full-price games that ask us to continue stumping up the cash. *Killer Instinct* at least shows some promise for a viable path, rotating free characters and giving you the option to buy more if you want.

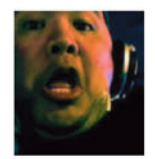
There's no proposed solution to this or cute way to end this column, because there really doesn't seem to be any way to stop this from happening. Should we really avoid *Gran Turismo 6* or *Forza Motorsport 5* in order to send out a message about microtransactions? That seems to be cutting off our nose to spite our face. And yet that's perhaps why microtransactions are so appealing to publishers, as they simply can't be ignored as easily as DLC or online passes. Let's cross our fingers and hope we never get to the point where console games are designed around their presence – we only have to look at what's happened to Facebook games to see what the ultimate outcome of that will be.

Ryan King is editor of NowGamer.com

GAME DEV STORY

with James Mielke

Back Into The Fray





In October 2013, I moved back to my native New York City from Kyoto, Japan, departing from my position as producer at Q-Games. The reasons are mundane (I returned home to take care of my parents), but despite the move, I still remain firmly engaged in the now-annual BitSummit indie event held in Kyoto. And now that nearly a year has passed since the first BitSummit, I am busily preparing the follow-up, which all things considered is going to be a monster.

When we first started BitSummit, it was a small event. I'm not being falsely humble; it was genuinely pretty small. Held in a small concert venue in Kyoto, we brought together about 140 indie developers from all over Japan. This year, however, it is most definitely less small. With the success of the last event we immediately knew the same venue wouldn't hold the follow-up. So after long months of searching for the right spot, we settled on the ultra-modern facility, the MiyakoMesse convention center. We're filling up a space that is roughly five times larger than the last event.

Because we were immediately approached by the Kyoto government with funding, we started planning about a week after the first event was over, which means we've been planning for about a year. But what this resulted in was something of a false sense of timeline security. You know how you pine for a movie that's coming out next year, and seems so far away? That's what BitSummit MMXIV felt like: "next year." Only now, it's this year, and as I write this it's about seven weeks away. Cripes.

> We're filling up a space that is roughly five times larger than the last event

Besides the Kyoto-fu government, and returning sponsors like Unity and Epic Games, one bold new supporter who swept in and – like Gandalf on the hill – brought BitSummit to a new level of prominence and credibility is The Behemoth, they of the castle crashing and theatrical battle blocking. The Behemoth's president, John Baez, is something of an indie champion. I met up with him at PAX Prime in 2013, having been connected by mutual friends at Sony Computer Entertainment, and after a few hours of enlightening conversation in which we discovered we had many common interests, The Behemoth was on board as the prime sponsor behind BitSummit MMXIV.

I was moved by John's support, having seen them make significant efforts to embrace the Japanese gaming community with their not-trivial presence at Tokyo Game Show some years past (it's a stark contrast to see a Western developer with their own booth at TGS, trust me). So to talk to him in person and feel mutual enthusiasm flowing, I knew I had found a great partner in bringing global knowledge to the Japanese indie developers.

But the challenge in creating the follow-up to BitSummit didn't rest solely in the realm of increased size; I wanted to take even veterans of the first event by surprise in terms of not only quantity but in scope. Most gaming events in Japan are pretty dry, sterile events that look like dental tool seminars with rows of white tables and lone projectors. I wanted to demolish that type of expectation, even though no one who attended the first BitSummit would ever expect that. But this year I went all out with an ambitious plan to take everyone by surprise, designing a polygonal stage set for not only the presenters and sponsors, but for the virtual mini-Glastonbury's worth of musical talent we'd bring up on stage.

Games are as much sound and music as a visual medium, and to that end I wanted to create the Woodstock of indie gaming events, bringing together a diverse array of musical guests. As of this writing we scheduled Masaya Matsuura (*PaRappa the Rapper*), Professor Sakamoto (chiptune artist), Baiyon (*PixelJunk Eden*), Manami Matsumae (*Mega Man, Mighty No. 9*), Saori Kobayashi (*Crimson Dragon, Panzer Dragoon*), Basiscape (soundtrackers supreme), Takayuki Nakamura (*Lumines*), and even the UK's own Chipzel. This is going to be an event to remember, and there's still so much work to be done between now and when the event kicks off. While we have more resources this year, one can truly never have enough. Wish me luck.



BitSummit MMXIV – coming soon to a Kyoto near you.

James Mielke is the director of the BitSummit conference



Five Things About
Super Smash Bros.

Easily the most eagerly anticipated Nintendo title scheduled for release in the next twelve months, Super Smash Bros. is doubling down this time as it arrives in two unique forms on Wii U and 3DS. Here's what you can expect to find…

1 More new characters announced…

One of the most exciting aspects about any new *Smash Bros.* game on the lead up to launch is predicting which iconic characters will make an appearance on the roster. The big surprise this time around is Mega Man but more recent announcements include the regal welcoming of newcomer Princess Rosalina from Super Mario Galaxy and returning combatant Zelda.

2 A fresh batch of stages

And in much the same way as speculating on new characters helps to while away the days until release, battlegrounds equally play as crucial a role in providing fan service. While *Pikmin 3* and *Mega Man* will be represented, the most enticing stage is lifted straight from *Super Mario Galaxy* – which we hope will feature its own unique physics and will give players the opportunity to battle over the entire spherical surface of one of the smaller planets.

3 Iconic characters in high definition

The Wii U version of *Super Smash Bros.* will be the first time that many of the characters will be rendered in high definition. That alone is more than enough reason to regard this as one of the most visually exciting titles arriving on the Wii U over the next year, but also the stylised presentation of the 3DS iteration makes it feel wholly unique in comparison to its bigger console counterpart.

4 Why it's worth owning both versions

As a counterweight to the previous point, the 3DS version will also be tailored specifically for the console. While that doesn't mean it'll feature its own set of characters (those will be identical across both systems), what it will have is its own stages based around handheld Nintendo titles, which include *Super Mario 3D Land*, *The Legend Of Zelda: Spirit Tracks*, *Mario Kart 7* and *Streetpass Quest*.

5 Customisation will be important

A new feature that has been briefly teased by director Masahiro Sakurai is the option to customise your character. While previously you've only been able to make insignificant colour adjustments to outfits, Sakurai teased a more comprehensive system will be in place in the sequel, even suggesting that players will be able to transfer their characters between the Wii U and 3DS.

Win A Swag Bag Of Insert Coin Clothing

→ To enter, take the games™ Reader Survey at gamestm.co.uk/survey

Disappointed with what's been on offer in the January sales? No need to worry – we've got you covered. **games™** has teamed up with Insert Coin Clothing and we've managed to procure a Swag Bag containing over £100 of awesome to give away to one lucky reader. The Swag Bag contains a collection of gaming-related apparel as well as the company's popular Dreamcast messenger bag.

Insert Coin Clothing is one of the most popular choices for the fashion-conscious gamer; if you're inspired by Jacket from *Hotline Miami* (which is concerning, but understandable) you can grab yourself his trademark letterman jacket, or – if you prefer – you can dress yourself up as *Street Fighter*'s resident Hadoken-er Ryu in a soft, downy dressing gown.

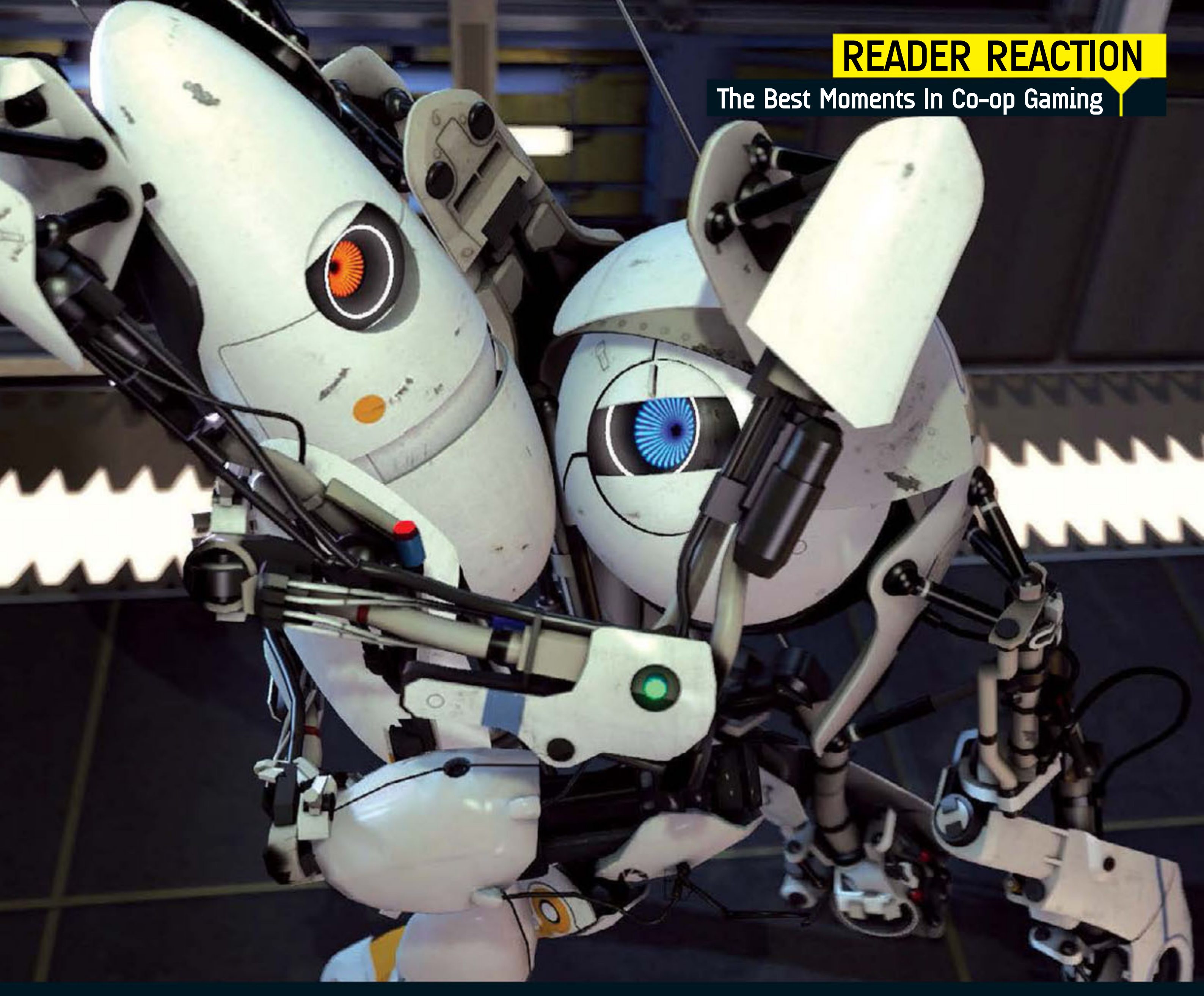
For a chance at winning Insert Coin Clothing's Bag Of Awesome, simply go to www.gamestm.co.uk/promotion/survey and fill out the simple Reader Survey. The competition closes on 20 March 2014.

Find out more at:
www.insertcoinclothing.com
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The Best Moments In Co-op Gaming

➔ With the next-generation consoles focusing heavily on upgrading the social side of gaming, we began reminiscing about the days of local co-op, splitscreen games, network play and LAN parties. We asked what defining co-op moments stand out the most for you…

■ *Resistance 2* eight-player co-op was completely epic, real shame they dropped it in *3 – Fuse* didn't replicate it at all.
@gjtomlinson, Twitter

■ Xbox launch day, two consoles, two TVs, four friends and *Halo*. It was the last time an experience ever felt truly 'next-gen' to me.
@invertednormals, Twitter

■ *New Super Mario Bros Wii.* Have I played better co-op games? Absolutely. However this was the first time in 26 years of gaming that my dad finally decided to pick up a controller to play a game after years of relative disinterest. For giving me that opportunity I will always be grateful.
Rob Hayes, Facebook

■ One of my earliest memories is playing *Donkey Kong Country* on the SNES, me as Donkey, my dad as Diddy. He still talks about it to this day, bless him.
Shane Rynhart, Facebook

■ Would have to be *Double Dragon* on the Commodore 64 with my best mate. Don't think we got to the bit where you have to fight each other though, probably for the best…
Mark Gregory, Facebook

■ 'Overwatch' on *Modern Warfare 2.* The amount of coordination and cooperation needed to beat it on three stars makes it the best co-op experience last gen.
Thomas Marshall, Facebook

■ My favourite co-op experience was playing *Resident Evil 5* with my best friend. We played so much that we got the infinite rocket launchers and it was the greatest feeling to blow infected people into smithereens.
Erik Andorfer, Facebook

■@Dreamip and I have been playing through *Borderlands 1* & *2* for over a year. A combined hatred for Handsome Jack keeps us going.
@siobhangx, Twitter

■ Taking down the Spiderdemon at the end of *Doom* on PS1 via Linkup, still one of my favourite co-op games ever.
@Mr_Moobs, Twitter



HEART OF *Darkness*

EIDOS MONTREAL HAS A PROVEN TRACK RECORD WHEN IT COMES TO REINVIGORATING OLD IP, AND NOW THE DEVELOPER HAS SET ITS SIGHTS ON ONE OF GAMING'S CLASSIC CULT PROPERTIES

We've just broken into a courtyard that's crawling with guards. We noticed two of them standing idly by an inactive water feature, two more patrolling the perimeter and another tending to a caged dog to the side. Our goal – a small vent into an architect's fortified mansion – is in sight over the yard. A guard passes by, oblivious to our presence, and we dismount behind him, sprinting to the safety of a nearby greenhouse. A patrolling guardsman passes by the door, and we crouch, pressing into the gloomy corners of the unlit room. Back in the real world, we hold our breath as we watch the watchman pass by. There isn't enough darkness to cover us – the PS4's lightbar tells us that, illuminating the play test room with white light – and we're not sure our personal goal of infiltrating the mansion unseen will be successful…

The guard passes by, unaware of our presence. Good. We search the room for a switch that will turn on the water feature outside – we hope it'll cause enough of a diversion for us to swoop past the collection of startled watchmen and make a dash for the house. As we search for a switch, we come across a loose brick in the wall. Cautiously, we press it – part of the wall »



“WE HOLD OUR BREATH AS THE WATCHMAN WALKS PAST. THERE ISN’T ENOUGH DARKNESS TO COVER US”



Unlike *Dishonored*, areas of high ground in *Thief* are few and far between.

See that oblivious guard's shimmering golden purse? Yeah, so do we.

falls away, revealing a secret path into the basement of the building. "The architect's house is full of hidden walkways, traps and rooms," a guard says as we slink into the passage.

This is a very different *Thief* to the one we played ten years ago. *Deadly Shadows* turned heads when it was released back in 2004, and since then the title has gone on to acquire a ferociously loyal fanbase, in the way that cult games do. There's been a lot of internet chatter about *Thief* in the run up to its launch, with players doubting the integrity of the developers or their understanding of the franchise itself. If one thing was clear from our visit to Eidos Montreal's studio, it's that the developer truly understands the *Thief* franchise – the assembled team is as hardcore as the fans they're working for.

> *"THIEF IS A HARD GAME, AND FAILURE DOESN'T DEAL OUT PUNISHMENT, IT ENCOURAGES OPPORTUNITY"*

"*Thief* is, and always has been, a game about tension," explains lead level designer Daniel Windfeld Schmidt. "In a lot of other games, you have those moments where it's like 'Oh my god, here comes that world-ending planetary explosion!' *Thief* is different – it has a lot of opportunity to study the subtleties of tension; you cram yourself into a corner because you think 'If I get caught here, I'm in serious trouble'. That tension is something I find is very easily lost in a lot of games.

One level takes you through a brothel where you spy on all the saucy goings on of the City. Pitchers of water, delicate serving trays and brandy glasses litter the floor – be careful not to knock them over.

Going back to that has been a challenge, but I think when you're playing the game, you get a lot of those moments."

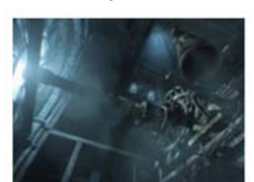
You do. We had a long sit down with *Thief* in Eidos Montreal's studio, and we spent the vast majority of that time on the edge of our seats. The developer has clearly made this game to stress you out – that sounds negative, but we mean it in the most engaging of ways. We opted to play through as a Ghost, aiming to remain completely anonymous for the whole session (we managed two chapters before detection). The way the game maintains tension is masterful – levels are fluid and designed with replayability in mind; if you're killed or even discovered (ending the game on some difficulties) then you can try a different approach. *Thief* is a hard game, and failure doesn't deal out punishment, it encourages opportunity.

"One of the best feelings I have in the game is that when I turn a corner and see a guard, instinctively I swoop back," Nicolas Cantin (the game's director/art designer) tells us. "That feeling – [deep inhalation] – my heart is beating, I'm holding my breath and it's all so subtle. That's a kind of feeling I don't think you get in those big action games anymore." He's right – the claustrophobia that sets in when you're hiding and guards begin to sniff you out is a feeling we've not experienced in a game for some time, with the surprising exception of the upcoming *Alien: Isolation*. With the swoop mechanic feeling like a more grounded reimagining of *Dishonored*'s 'blink', *Thief* even manages to dictate how you breathe in certain encounters – as Cantin said, turn a corner, face a guard and you swoop back, breathing in as you do so. The motion blur, the sound, the dip of the camera as Garrett retreats – it all plays into making you feel sneaky, making you feel undetectable, making you feel like a true thief.





This factory sees you navigating your way through factory lines of the dead. Lovely.



Garrett, something of a loner, lives in a clock tower like some vengeful hunchback (this is also where he stashes all his loot so you can browse your spoils in-between missions).

This thief-like symbiosis is a strange feeling when you first start playing, and one that takes some getting used to. During the tutorial level – which in itself is a well-presented tour through both the world and mechanics of this rebooted *Thief* – Garrett clocks a patrol of guards and mutters to himself "It pays to keep a low profile in places where I'm not welcome". The Watch are men that are kitted out with swords, crossbows, armour. Garrett is a thief whose primary tools are his hands – he's going to do everything he can to make sure he doesn't damage them. This means staying out of combat at almost all times – should a patrolman appear you have to 'deal with', you can incapacitate him from behind, with arrows or with thrown items. Under no circumstances should you engage more than one guard at a time – they *will* overpower you. *Thief* rebels against the idea that power comes from an imposing physical presence; Garrett isn't Marcus Phoenix, Solid Snake or Ezio Auditore – he offers an experience more intimate and in touch with some of the more interesting human desires.

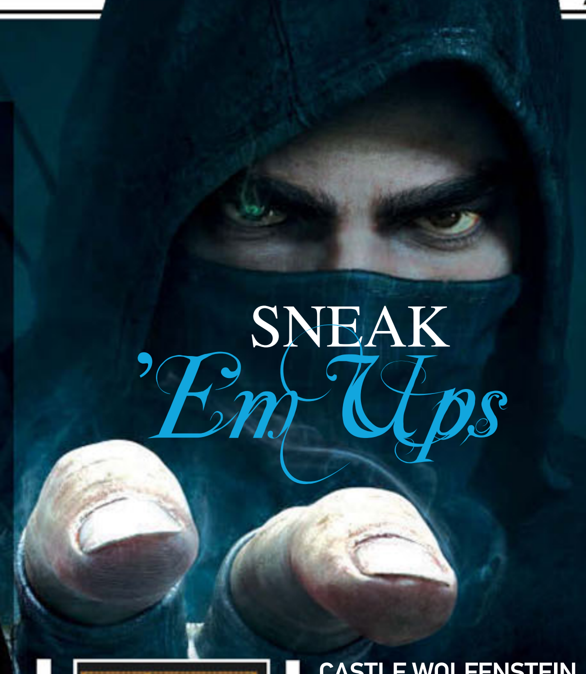
"It's still like a power fantasy to feel smarter than your opponent," explains Daniel Windfeld Schmidt. "The fact that you stole somebody's money from underneath his nose and he never saw you, never knew what happened – that's an insult to him. That you're so clever, smart or good at what you do; that you achieved your goal through intelligence rather than brute force – that's a big part of what makes stealth games so empowering." Schmidt also explains how players associate with the idea of 'cops and robbers' – playing as the underdog comes with its own sense of excitement, its own rebellious elation. »

» To be put into the shoes of Garrett, a perfect rogue, is a dream role, and one that isn't too often explored in modern videogaming. "The *Thief* fantasy is something that's very rare – it's very different from a lot of games, and I think players are going to find that incredibly rewarding." One part of the demo allowed us to snatch an aristocrat's necklace as she was still wearing it. This sounds a little ridiculous, and it was, but the sense of achievement that flowered from this completely optional, non-essential moment was defining – that is the point of *Thief*, to see how far your skills can be pushed.

Garrett is, essentially, a voyeur – another element of player empowerment Eidos has chosen to implement in the game. A lot of incidental dialogue comes from choosing to listen in on ambient conversation – you can miss whole chunks of character setup, narrative exposition or personal insight if you rush through the missions, or choose not to explore the central hub of Stonemarket thoroughly. None of this dialogue is essential, of course – players that want gameplay and nothing else even have the option to disable Garrett's contextualising soliloquies – but for those that want to keep their finger on the faltering pulse of The City, sleuthing is essential. "For players that are interested in the story," explains Windfeld Schmidt, "we want to reward them with content if they choose to play in stealth. It's a nightmare for our boss – the producer – because ambient dialogue is expensive content that we add to the game and that players can just ignore! But this is our subtle way of giving the players content – in certain places, we tease secret loot that's hidden around, but you have to pay attention to get there."

"By using a lot of voyeurism in the game, we add more to that feeling of being a thief; Garrett is always hidden, always observing things," Cantin tells us. "You can't always do these things in real life. It makes the fantasy stronger. We make sure this subversive behaviour isn't portrayed as a negative thing for a thief. Yes, Garrett is a criminal, an anti-hero, a dark character, but he's not a villain. He's not a bad guy – that's not the fantasy we wanted to sell." The scattered and breakable nature of NPC dialogue adds a replayability factor to the game, too: if you play through a level a second time and choose a different path, or choose not to incapacitate a certain character, you're more likely to stumble upon secret areas or items that you missed the first time through (and trust us, there is a *lot* to miss).

This desire to keep players coming back to the game, learning its tricks, its maps and its mechanics, seems



SNEAK 'Em Ups

Stealth games tend to subvert the tropes of classic game design – the main focus of a stealth title is to *avoid* antagonists, rather than engage and defeat them. 'Stealth' is an umbrella term that can be applied to various mechanical styles in games – from first-person titles to platformers, action-adventures to survival horrors. As a stealth game, *Thief* sits among good company – but if you're not a fan of the first-person perspective, then maybe these other titles will quench your thirst for the shadows.



CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN

The Apple II game was one of the original stealth titles (at least in parts) and featured gameplay mechanics that allowed you to steal uniforms from guards to disguise themselves and walk out of levels unharmed.

TENCHU: STEALTH ASSASSINS



One of the first games to try to communicate what it takes to be a ninja, *Stealth Assassins* made you utilise stealth tactics if you wanted to survive – you couldn't just hurl kunai and shuriken at everyone and everything to succeed.

METAL GEAR SOLID



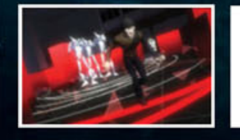
Having already experimented with stealth mechanics in earlier *Metal Gear* games, Kojima and his team evolved this into the seminal 3D stealth-based game that's commonly used as a point of reference for the genre to this day.

SPLINTER CELL



Inspired by *Metal Gear Solid*, but wanting to take a more grounded and realistic approach to the genre, the *Splinter Cell* games would often have you outright fail a mission if you were discovered.

VOLUME



An upcoming release from *Thomas Was Alone*'s Mike Bithell, *Volume* takes the bases stealth mechanics and reimagines them in a Medieval-inspired realm of augmented reality and computer hackers.



A SILENT History

The *Thief* franchise has a rich history, its short but renowned legacy inspiring an assembly of hardcore fans. Square Enix's reboot has been in the shadows of development for a while, scouting out the strengths and weaknesses of its predecessors, analysing their most valuable aspects – learning from their mistakes and emulating their strengths. We look back over Garrett's lifespan to see specifically what darkness created him…

THIEF: THE DARK PROJECT 1998



Developed by Looking Glass Studios with its internally developed Dark Engine, the original *Thief* broke new ground in game development. It featured a first-person perspective, but was not an adrenaline-fuelled shooter along the lines of most of its peers – Garrett was a lean and responsive fighter, but not particularly strong. There was a sliding scale of morality in the game, too – something not particularly common at the time of the title's release. After achieving a cult following, the game received a re-release as *Thief Gold*; updating gameplay, galvanising the story and reintroducing levels which were cut due to developmental deadlines.



This is Orion – the crux of the wider story. He leads the Graven, a faction set against the City's ruling Baron. The Graven fights for the people and their rights; a grassroots movement against the greedy ruling classes that dominate the poor.

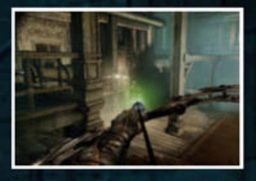
> *"WE WANT TO REWARD PLAYERS WITH CONTENT IF THEY CHOOSE TO PLAY IN STEALTH"*

to have bled through into every aspect of its development. Seemingly in response to the fan outcry that the game wasn't doing enough to honour the legacy of the franchise, Eidos has chosen to include a glut of customisation options – each providing a multiplier that increases a level's score depending on how difficult you make it for yourself. Our favourite examples of this was the first band of custom playstyles – labelled 'Classic Thief': like the original series, these mods offer you the ability to only save at the start of chapters, strip away the controversial focus mode, allow stealth-only takedowns or remove the reticule.

Harder options – listed as 'Legendary' and 'Ultimate Thief' take these custom difficulties further: no health/focus recovery, zero damage tolerance, expensive resources, slower movement and restricted tools make up the 'Legendary' bracket, whereas 'Ultimate' includes a permadeath mod, failure upon being spotted and a pacifist mode (where Garrett can't kill/takedown).



If you do have to knock someone out, it's always better to do it from behind. Garrett's a thief, not a fighter, and you're constantly reminded of that.



The fact these options are available in a console game is reassuring. It's clear that Eidos wants players to see *Thief* as a competitive game – with full leaderboard functionality and incentives for completing the game under certain conditions, we anticipate Twitch streams popping up all over the place, offering unique insight for players that are having trouble with certain parts of the game. "We were playing the game with our marketing guy the other day," explains Windfeld Schmidt, "and he showed us this way of taking out a certain selection of guards we hadn't even thought of. It's this iterative aspect of the game that we want to see explored by the online communities." Cantin interjects, laughing. "We're looking forward to seeing things we didn't know were possible!"

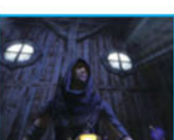
The developer pedigree behind the game is as diverse as it is reassuring – Cantin himself has experience in *Splinter Cell* and *Assassin's Creed* (the »

THIEF II: THE METAL AGE 2000



Looking Glass Studios, inspired by the success of the first *Thief*, kept its design philosophies incredibly similar for the series' second instalment. Built in the same engine, with many of the same mechanics, graphics and programming techniques, the title seemed to step back from combat, focusing more on making you feel like a legitimate thief – levels were designed around this idea, with the narrative scripted to fit sneaking and looting. This approach shows clearly – *Thief II* is an addictively playable game, and though you can tell the story is wrangled to fit, it doesn't detract too much from the overall experience.

THIEF: DEADLY SHADOWS 2004



With Looking Glass Studios going out of business in May 2000, developmental duties fell on the shoulders on Ion Storm. Forgoing the Dark Engine in favour of an Unreal-based engine, *Deadly Shadows* introduced a more open city hub which was available to explore between missions (much like the reboot). The game introduced moving shadows and light sources, making the stealth gameplay more dynamic and reactive – helping the genre move away from heavily scripted level design. AI was also improved, allowing enemies to spot when doors were opened or items were taken.

very flavour of *Assassin's* is down to Cantin's initial work on the franchise) and Windfeld Schmidt earned his developmental chops on *Hitman* and *Freedom Fighters*. An influence of *Hitman*'s distinct multi-path stealth playstyle is apparent in the game, as are some visual elements of *Assassin's*. "A similarity between *Assassin's* and *Thief* might be the architecture," explains Cantin. "We did a lot of thinking about that – making sure the buildings all fit, all seem very credible. You want to go into a building and believe what you see – both games are set in a certain point in the past, and you want to make sure players *believe* what they're seeing."

The setting of *Thief* takes its cues from the last entry in the franchise – *Deadly Shadows*. Like its predecessor, Garrett's stomping ground revolves around the hub map of Stonemarket – a place where your main mission-giver, Bosso, resides. *Thief*'s narrative DNA is a double helix, weaving the two independent stories together to form one, living whole. Garrett's personal arc – an interpersonal journey for clarity and closure – intertwines with the political intrigue taking place within The City – an ideological war between the rebellious Orion and the traditionalist Baron. It all feels very serious, and forms a strong framework within which you can comfortably explore the richly detailed world that's laid out for you.

"IT'S 50/50, HALF EXPERIENCE AND HALF GAMEPLAY"

"It isn't about taking in the sights," your apprentice Erin goads during the tutorial as you emerge onto The City's twilight skyline. "It's about taking in the loot." Luckily, then, the loot looks as good as the rest of the game; all items up for plunder gleam with a radiant gold finish, and Garrett's interactions with them feel delicate and realistic. Being a first-person stealth game, Eidos has directed a vast amount of resources into keeping the immersive quality of the perspective consistent. Never is this clearer than in Garrett's hands – which are perhaps the most realistic, responsive tools brought to life in a first-person view that we've seen. "When we choose to say 'Garrett is going to be on-screen and we're going to feel emotion through his hands'… it doesn't add that much to the gameplay itself, but it adds a lot to the experience." Cantin tells us. "With the whole next-gen thing now, it's all about the experience; like audio versus visual, it's 50/50 – half experience and half gameplay."

Cantin's observations got us thinking – when you play as Garrett, his hands trace lines on the walls as you walk by them, his meticulous searching of picture frames and walls for hidden switches look practiced, reflexive. As an industry, we're close to approaching photorealism in terms of graphics, but it's that animated realism we lack. That's one of the selling points of *Thief* to us; you can tell Eidos has invested incredible amounts of time and thought into making Garrett *feel* like a true thief. The dexterity of his fingers' movements never ceases to entertain – it can be the first or the 31st time you're cutting a painting from its frame, but each time you admire the fluid ease with which he moves anew.

Thief has certainly stirred the passions of its hardcore fans, and Eidos has been sensitive in its response the worries of the series' core following: dropping the controversial EXP system, implementing classic *Thief* mods, sticking within the setting of *Deadly Shadows* – it's clear the developer is paying as much respect to the game's roots as possible. "We're looking forward to getting this game out there," says Windfeld Schmidt, "we hope that we can live up to the legacy!" Cantin continues, "We're happy about what we have; it's a game that's true to that fantasy of being a thief – well, not only a thief but a *master* thief. I think newcomers will appreciate this experience as much as old *Thief* fans will."

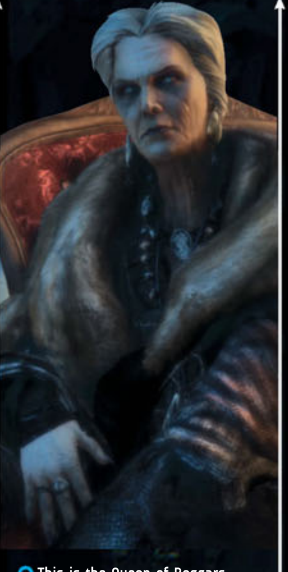
We completely agree, having played the older games in the franchise. It's clear the passion and fervour that's been brought into the creation of this game. Strong in the face of scepticism, and defiant in the face of its doubters, Eidos aims to prove, once again, it can work its magic on a gaming property that would have otherwise been left to rot in the vaults of nostalgia forever. Eidos is bringing Garrett back, and he's going to be better than ever.



The first-person view in *Thief* truly is spectacular; a lot of care has been taken to make sure Garrett moves as realistically as possible.



The PS4's light bar adds a lot to the feeling of concealment; the bright white that emits from the pad when you're exposed is a fantastic use of the hardware.

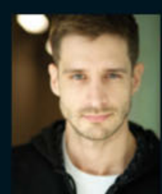


This is the Queen of Beggars – she knows more than she lets on about Garrett's affliction with the Primal (the mysterious force that made his eye go funky). You can buy Focus upgrades from her.

WE BUILT THIS *City*

A thief is useless without things to steal and places to steal them from, so we sat down with the game's director – Nicolas Cantin – to discuss the various locales Garrett will be stalking, sneaking and sleuthing through...

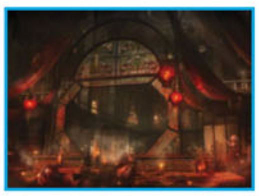
Nicolas Cantin is both the director and art director of *Thief*.



Daniel Windfeld Schmidt is *Thief*'s lead level designer.

OLD QUARTER

"The Old Cathedral is here [from events in the last game]. So it's all abandoned – you go there and there's a lot of stuff relating to the old game, and you think 'Hmm, maybe I've been here before...' The post-processing here is a bit bluer than everywhere else, too, because we wanted to give it that unsettling, disquieting feeling. We wanted to outline the area's heritage, but subtly. All the districts reference something from the older games, but that's something we like to do quietly."





DAYPORT

"Dayport has changed since the previous game; it's now the rich district – the 'new' district. The rich protect themselves against the rest of The City – this is where technology has really advanced. The Watch presence is really huge here, and the architecture is more Victorian than Medieval. The post-processing and lighting here is a little warmer here to reflect that rich feeling."



STONEMARKET

"The Clocktower is in the middle of Stonemarket – you go back here after each mission. It's your hub; there's a lot of narrative content here, Bosso is here, the Black Market shop is there. From here, you can get side-quests that lead you to other areas you can unlock." (Windfeld Schmidt chimes in; "And because the Clocktower is here, it's always really easy to find!")



THE DOCKS

"The Docks are in the South Quarter and are darker in aspect – they're more criminal, you'll notice that within the NPCs (fewer Watchmen around, for example). The architecture here is different, too; it's more wooden, so climbing in this area will be different to the rest of the game."



The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past

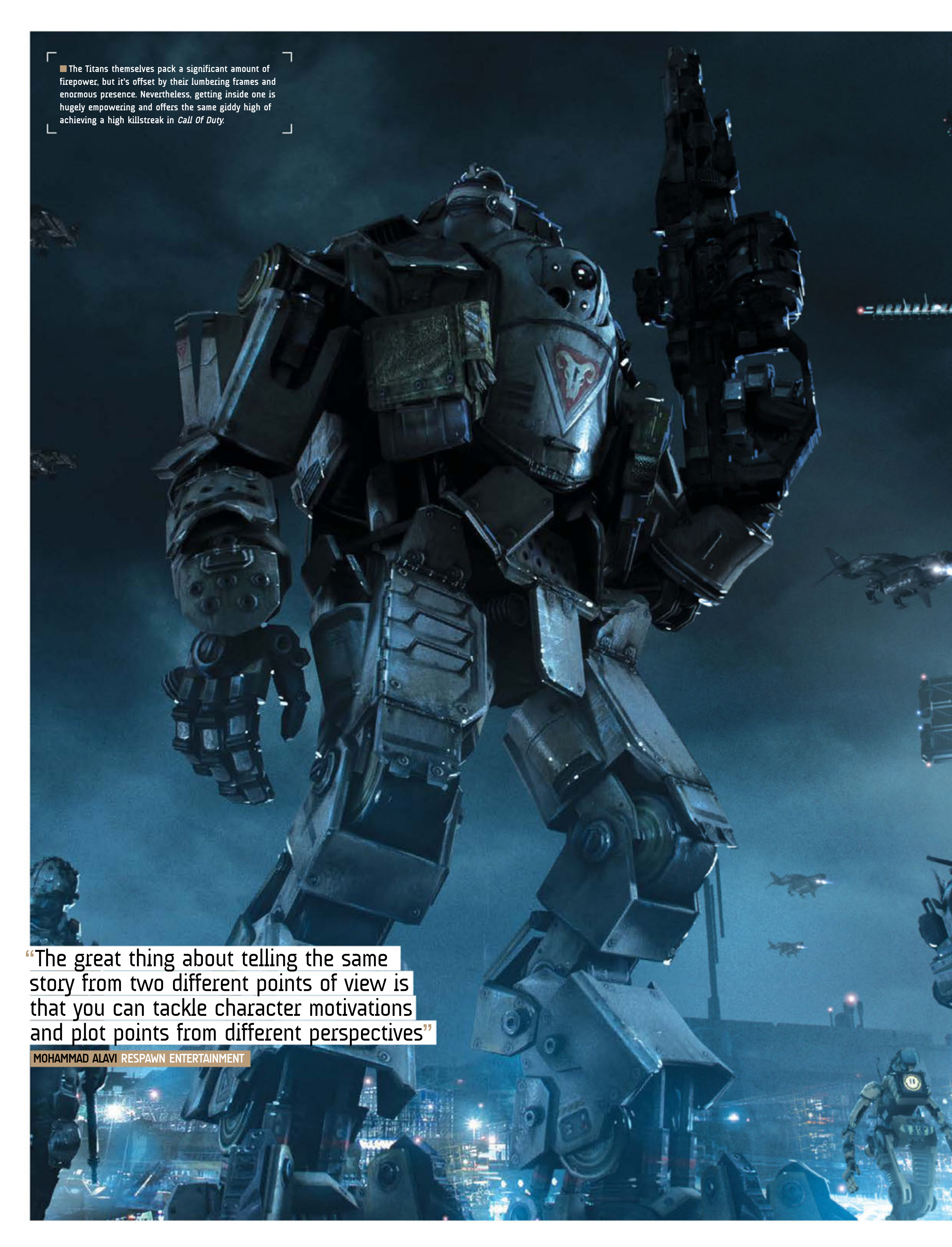
TOMMY REFENES, TEAM MEAT

For me… This is tough! I think mine would be A Link To The Past. *I didn't play the first Zelda until much later. The first one I played was* Zelda II *and that was great, but* A Link To The Past *was just insanely magical. I've been thinking about it a lot since* A Link Between Worlds *came out, which I really enjoyed. Number one, you're going from NES to SNES and there's a huge graphical and sound jump between the two. You go into it, go through those first few dungeons or whatever and then you get your Master Sword and kind of assume that's the end. Then you kill the guy and he draws you into the Dark World and you're like, 'What the hell just happened?' – I don't feel like that feeling can ever happen again. It's too hard to keep secrets nowadays. It's always going to be spoiled. It's that sort of moment where a game totally surprises you and gives you something totally new and unexpected… I really felt that with* A Link To The Past. *It's a game that I go back to a lot. I probably play through it about once a year – it's just so good.*



"It's that sort of moment where a game totally surprises you and gives you something totally new and unexpected"

TOMMY REFENES, TEAM MEAT



The Titans themselves pack a significant amount of firepower, but it's offset by their lumbering frames and enormous presence. Nevertheless, getting inside one is hugely empowering and offers the same giddy high of achieving a high killstreak in *Call Of Duty*.

"The great thing about telling the same story from two different points of view is that you can tackle character motivations and plot points from different perspectives"

MOHAMMAD ALAVI RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT



Titanfall

CONCEPT ■ From the people that are really good at making people shoot each other comes another game about people shooting each other. With robots!

Respawn Entertainment discusses bringing storytelling into the multiplayer arena

Xbox One's sales figures may be trailing slightly behind PlayStation 4 since launch but there's little denying the palpable excitement felt for Microsoft's first big new IP exclusive. With alpha invites randomly sent out in late January, anticipation has been steadily mounting for Respawn's *Titanfall* with a flurry of excitement following a glut of new information and leaked footage making its way online over the last few weeks. And it's easy to see why. The gameplay appears to bridge that gap between *Halo*'s vertiginous design and *Call Of Duty*'s punchy military histrionics, both significantly enlivened by the presence of hulking mechs that change the face of the battlefield upon deployment. Will it be the much called for revolution of the first-person shooter? Well, that depends on how loosely you regard the term's definition. Nevertheless, immersing yourself in the carnage is an absolute blast and it's commendable that Respawn has sought to weave single-player linear storytelling into fast-placed arena-style multiplayer action.

"I know *Half-Life* wasn't the first shooter to tell a story completely through the eyes of the player, but it stands out to me at as the first very successful attempt," says Respawn's Mohammad Alavi, level designer on *Titanfall*. "Since then, the FPS genre has been doing a balancing act of telling a compelling narrative without sacrificing gameplay. What makes *Titanfall*'s campaign mode unique is that we're giving players the production values of a finely crafted cinematic experience they're used to from current-gen shooters, but we're doing it within the framework of competitive multiplayer. We've designed the game in such a way that the narrative never obfuscates the goals or objectives, but only gives them more impetus."

How that's done is simple enough in Campaign Multiplayer. Alongside your allied and rival human players will be a selection of NPCs that will convey story elements during matches, with prologues and epilogues that'll often round off story elements before all the shooting takes place. "From picture-in-picture updates from NPCs and events that unfold in-game, to the AI soldiers reacting on the ground, the narrative unfolds naturally and ties in seamlessly with the gameplay," explains Alavi. "Along with the main story arc, major and minor characters react and acknowledge your direct actions, creating a personal experience crafted just for you set in a larger framework. In multiplayer lobbies we continue the narrative to help bridge the gaps between levels. You'll be changing your loadouts and viewing unlocks while listening to mission briefings that drive the plot along."

/// You can enlist into either of the two factions – IMC or Militia – before you start off and you'll progress through milestones in the narrative until you reach the end of the story. Once you've completed the game you'll be given the option to start again playing as the other faction. Only after beating the game from both sides will you be able to select any of the previous missions, but this will be alongside more traditional modes for those that would rather not have their multiplayer with a side order of needless exposition – and you'll earn XP regardless of which way you'd prefer to play the game.

But there's an interesting question in how much the narrative has an impact on progression and the studio's storytelling ambition. Respawn hasn't discussed where this assimilation of single-player tropes starts and ends, and it's unclear whether a loss in Campaign Multiplayer will result in a mission restart or a continuing of the narrative in another form. We'd be impressed if it was the former – further inviting repeat playthroughs – and that very much could be the case. Talking to Respawn, it's clear that the studio is cultivating the type of scenarios that should make the story as engaging as the multiplayer gameplay. "Most consumers play the single-player campaign of any shooter only once, and then go on to play multiplayer for months or years," says Alavi. "Single-player campaigns take hundreds of thousands of man hours to develop, and with a team as small as ours we couldn't afford to sink that kind of development time into a four to eight hour journey that people will only play

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, Xbox 360, Xbox One
Origin: US
Publisher: EA
Developer: Respawn Entertainment
Release: 13 March
Genre: First-person shooter
Players: 1-12

Developer Profile

Newly-formed Respawn Entertainment was founded by Jason West and Vince Zampella, formally of *Call Of Duty* studio Infinity Ward. The duo notoriously departed the company after being allegedly fired by parent company Activision. However, the exit caused many senior members of Infinity Ward to follow, forming Respawn Entertainment. The studio's first project will be *Titanfall*, published by Electronic Arts.

Developer History

Titanfall
2014
[PC, Xbox 360, Xbox One]

High Point

While it's the only game currently on the studio's slate, *Titanfall* isn't just the high point for the studio by default, but could potentially be a triumph for the first-person shooter genre itself.

once. What we're hoping to achieve is to take an exciting cinematic experience and weave it into multiplayer gameplay so compelling, that players will continue to be engrossed in the universe of *Titanfall* for months and years after its release."

Alavi is reluctant to draw a parity between the MMO genre and what its attempting to achieve with *Titanfall*: "While MMOs have certainly been incorporating narrative into online multiplayer, I don't think you can draw a direct comparison to the shooter genre," he says. "There's a whole slew of design considerations that might work in an MMO that simply do not translate over into FPS games and vice versa." And while Respawn is on the topic of how deeply story is interwoven into the gameplay, Alavi further elaborates on the unique storytelling opportunities the dual perspective offers.

"The great thing about telling the same story from two different points of view is that you can tackle character motivations and plot points from different perspectives," he says. "When you play as the Militia you'll see one side of the fight. As the plot progresses, you'll accompany the main characters on their adventure, learning their motivations and back story. Even though the plot will make complete sense from start to finish, you're only getting half the picture. After you've completed the campaign on one side, you'll have to play from the other to fully grasp to scope of events you participated in. It's also really cool to see how the 'other side' perceives the faction you just played on. It's interesting how propaganda and labelling are used to demonise the 'enemy'."

/// It's all to make the world feel more alive, which is no easy feat. And there are other aspects that can potentially remove players from being fully immersed in *Titanfall*'s drama, including the AI. It's one aspect of design that has been vaunted by Respawn, promoting the computer-controlled allies' ability to plan mission strategies, provide covering fire and acknowledge the actions you take – even down to the type of equipment you're carrying at the time. "They'll salute you in quieter moments and thank you for saving them in more dire situations," details Alavi. "They get into fist fights, help injured friendlies, and even freak out when their squad is single-handedly wiped out by a Titan. These are just a very narrow set of the many tools we use to not only bring a sense of cinematic intensity, but also create a fully fleshed-out world."

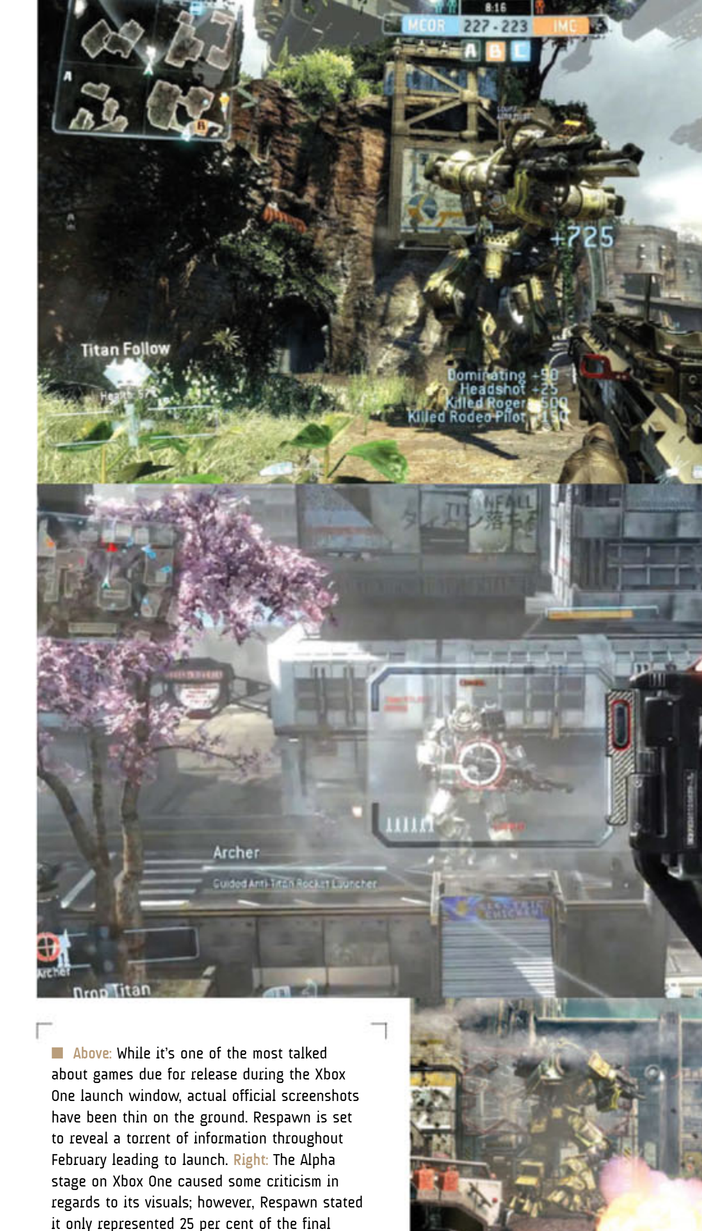


But the community hasn't been shy in voicing its disappointment regarding some of the confirmed features. The game supports two teams of six – however Respawn did test teams of eight before scaling back the size for performance reasons – and the inclusion of AI combatants alongside human has bemused some dissatisfied with the meagre player count. There's even a questionable interest in the narrative component itself. During events that we've seen *Titanfall* playable, players have often run off before the captain has relayed exposition to the troops and plot beats have been trim at best – not much evidence to suggest that Respawn has quite nailed the mergence of narrative and multiplayer yet.

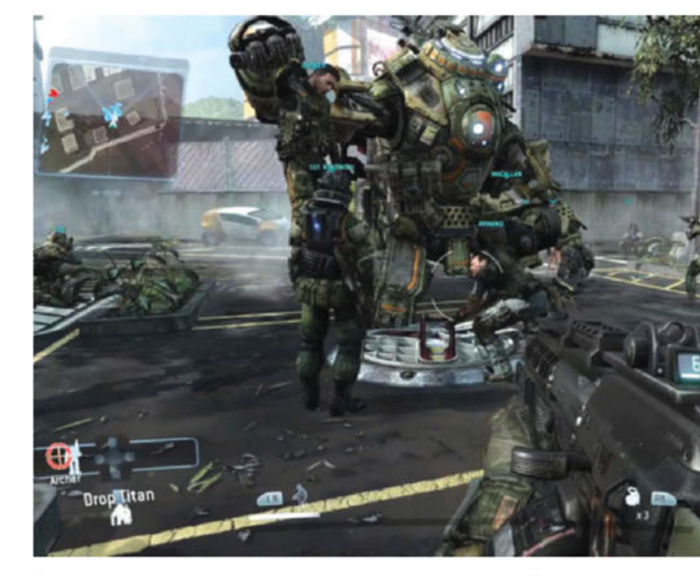
However, few would question the fact that it's in the gameplay where *Titanfall* truly speaks for itself. It's a high-tech cat and mouse game where verticality and speed are integral components to both survival and gaining the upper hand on your enemy. It also appears to be incredibly balanced, with the Titans possessing formidable firepower but cumbersome to control and confined to the main streets. Pilots, by comparison, don't quite pack the same punch but are able to use their environment much more skilfully, employing parkour-like abilities to gain a vantage point.

> "What we're hoping to achieve is to take an exciting cinematic experience and weave it into multiplayer gameplay"
>
> **MOHAMMAD ALAVI, RESPAWN ENTERTAINMENT**

It also has the novel epilogue feature, wherein once the time limit is up the losing team are tasked with evacuating to a dropship, avoiding being capped by the opposite team in a last-ditch scramble for pride and XP. It's here that you get the best impression of how Respawn is seeking to give some deeper theatrical and narrative resonance to the action on display. The breakneck race towards your evacuation point is one that positively electrifies the scenario and creates a tension and urgency to the story that might get lost amidst the hail of gunfire on the battlefield. If Respawn can manage to maintain this level of involvement, then *Titanfall* could turn out to be not just a great game, but a vital one.



Above: While it's one of the most talked about games due for release during the Xbox One launch window, actual official screenshots have been thin on the ground. Respawn is set to reveal a torrent of information throughout February leading to launch. Right: The Alpha stage on Xbox One caused some criticism in regards to its visuals; however, Respawn stated it only represented 25 per cent of the final game's resolution.

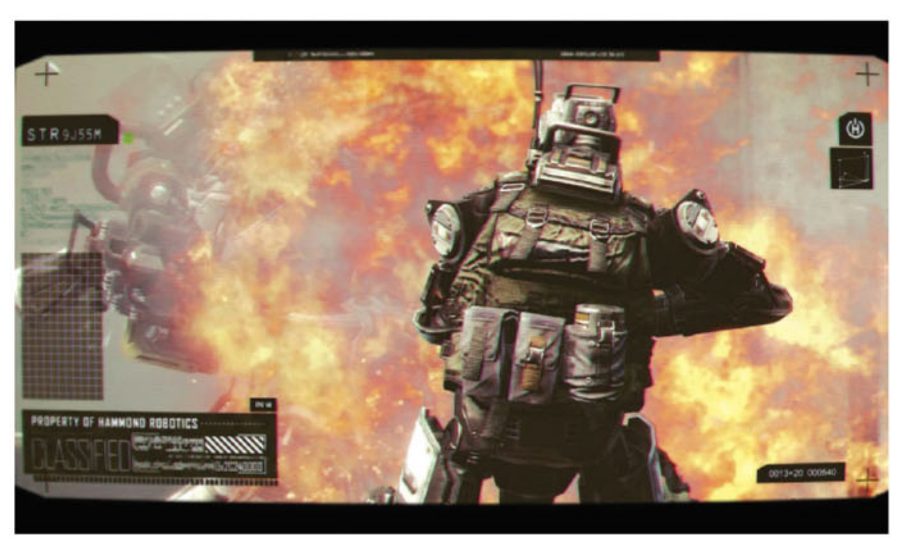


Above: While it's a Microsoft exclusive, Respawn hasn't ruled out that future instalments might make an appearance on Sony consoles.



THIS IS THE END

ONE QUESTION THAT many gamers have been asking is whether the story of *Titanfall* will have a definitive end, or will the narrative be divided into a series of fragmented chapters with no discernable ending. Talking to Respawn Entertainment's Mohammad Alavi, he clarifies that the game will indeed have a satisfying conclusion to its story: "*Titanfall* will most definitely have an ending," he confirms. "It's not a story if it doesn't have an ending, but there are multiple sides to that story. It's told from both the Militia and IMC perspectives, and to fully grasp *Titanfall*'s campaign, you'll need to play it from both sides. And as with any good story, we've hopefully peppered it with enough detail and nuance that you'll notice something new every time you replay it."

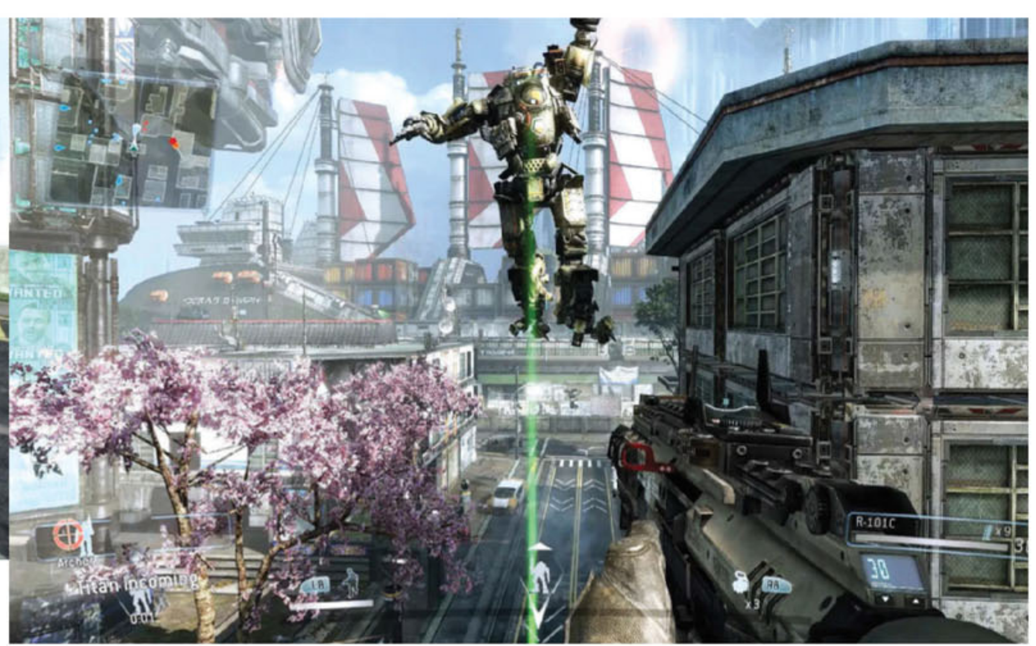




■ **Above:** The speed that Pilots can navigate around maps means that spaces are much wider, not to mention scaling upwards to take advantage of both parkour abilities and jetpacks. Mastering navigating buildings, walls and rooftops will be as essential as a steady aim. **Below:** Alpha invites went out in January, giving those lucky enough to be chosen an opportunity to put the game through its paces.







A LOAD(OUT) OF INFORMATION

DETAILS HAVE BEEN leaking out thick and fast since the alpha period back in January and one of the most interesting aspects to be revealed is how the loadouts in the game will work. You'll get to customise your loadout for both your Pilot and your Titan separately. The former gets a primary weapon, an Anti-Titan weapon and a sidearm, plus an Ordnance slot, a Tactical Ability slot (for power-ups like a timed cloak) and two kit slots (for perk-like enhancements). Titans however have just one weapon, but the rest of their loadout is the same as Pilots. An example of Titan kit slot item includes an Auto-Eject Feature and Nuclear Ejection, which releases an explosive charge when your Titan is taken out.

HOW FAR IS TOO FAR?

GROUND ZEROES RECENTLY received the rare 'sexual violence' ERSB rating, solidifying the game as an 18+ release – only the second ever videogame to receive such a rating (the first being *Animamundi: Dark Alchemist*, a PC visual narrative released in 2006). The rating was given due to audio recordings that apparently depict 'ripped clothing and sounds of struggle'. This questionable scene makes an appearance in a game already confirmed to have scenes of gore and intense violence – where other media (films, TV) have been around long enough to effectively deal with such themes, we wonder whether the response to interactively involving yourself with these events will be taken positively by consumers at large. Only time will tell.

■ Above: *Phantom Pain* won't be too far behind *Ground Zeroes* on the release schedule Below: If you think one encampment is too small for an *MGS* game, don't worry; *MGSV* itself will be roughly 100 times bigger!





■ Above: 'From FOX, two phantoms were born' quotes the game in a trailer. Between this and some imagery of the FOX symbol, we're expecting some kind of faction war between two splinter groups…

Metal Gear Solid V: Ground Zeroes

CONCEPT ■ The opening chapter to *Metal Gear Solid V, Ground Zeroes* aims to introduce players to an open-world playground for Snake and his tactical espionage operations.

There's room for only one Snake… and one Big Boss

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Konami
Developer: Kojima Productions
Release: 20 March
Genre: Stealth
Players: 1

Developer Profile

Most notable for his work on the *Metal Gear* series, Kojima and his development team pioneered the Fox Engine and have also been involved with *Castlevania, Zone Of The Enders* and *SD Snatcher*. A distinct style, diverse influences and a taste for the dramatically absurd set Kojima apart from his peers.

Developer History

Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance **Multi [2013]**
Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns Of The Patriots **PS3 [2008]**
Zone Of The Enders **PS2 [2001]**

High Point

The original *Metal Gear Solid* showed off just how capable a machine the PlayStation was, with cinematic cut-scenes providing an experience unseen on consoles at the time.

Never try and predict Kojima – you'll never foresee his next move. When *Ground Zeroes* was announced as a completely different entity from *Metal Gear Solid V* proper, we were taken aback, but not completely surprised: Kojima has built himself a reputation for being able to do what he likes. Oddly though, *Ground Zeroes* will debut on the PS3 and Xbox 360 too, which is unanticipated considering the visual fidelity of the game. It won't run at 60fps like it will on Xbox One and PS4 and some of the texture quality will dip, but still, this is an incredible looking game, and you can expect to see similar attributes over both versions.

Powered by the Fox Engine, *Ground Zeroes* will act as a prelude to the main instalment of *Metal Gear Solid V* – operating as a sort-of tutorial level for the full title. That doesn't mean *Ground Zeroes* is a small game though; set in an almost open-world American military facility on Cuban soil (circa 1975), Snake – or Big Boss – is tasked with searching for Paz, a surviving Cipher agent from the *Peace Walker* game (it feels important here to note that *Ground Zeroes* takes place after *Peace Walker*, not – as the numerical title would suggest – after *Guns Of The Patriots*).

It seems Kojima Studios' main goal with *Ground Zeroes* is to wholly redefine the *Metal Gear* experience without taking away too much of what makes the series unique. Core mechanics have been altered – weight is given to interrogation, slo-mo executions and fast travel; could these be the cosmetic influences of Western stealth games like *Splinter Cell* on the *Metal Gear* franchise?

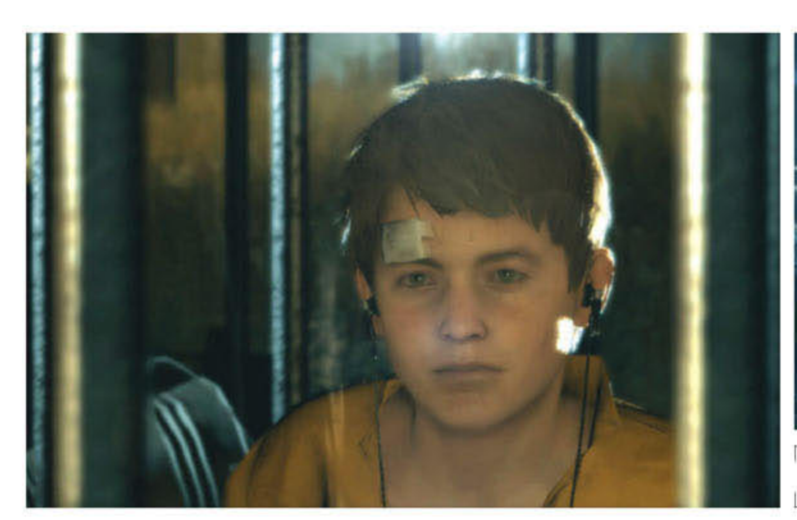
Seemingly inspired by the title's peers, one of the more interesting things we've noticed about the gameplay is the stripping down of the HUD; gameplay prompts are provided through the environment in *Ground Zeroes* in an effort to make your traversal through Camp Omega feel stealthier – on-screen button prompts appear near contextual items like ladders and doors, and lens flare denotes danger of being detected when a search light falls upon you. Damage is represented through blood spatter misting the screen, and sustained injuries don't seem permanent – there are no ration packs in sight.

/// Should your position become exposed, though, combat will more than likely ensue. When single enemies spot you, time (for some reason – probably nanomachines) slows down, entering Snake into a bullet-time inspired experience where he has a few extra seconds to execute the enemy before a real alarm is triggered. This means, like *Splinter Cell* games, detection doesn't mean failure – you can resolve situations before they erupt too badly.

If you fail to defuse these instances, sirens bleat and your co-ordinates are broadcast to any nearby guards. Here, *Ground Zeroes* transforms from a conventional *Metal Gear Solid* game into a third-person shooter, which we don't mind; it all looks gorgeous and seems to handle effectively and responsively.

It's clear that Kojima is keen to show off exactly what he's working towards with *Metal Gear Solid V*. Like *Dead Rising 2: Case Zero*, *Ground Zeroes* will be a digital prelude – a preface to the open-world behemoth that *Metal Gear Solid V* will be. It's an idea that we're keen to see more of in the industry, and offers interesting narrative ideas, too; apparently the story of *Ground Zeroes* will set up Snake's character for the game proper. Whether this means we'll dive into the taboo territory of child soldiers (via the Les Enfants Terrible project that birthed Solid Snake and his brothers) remains to be seen, but Kojima has explicitly stated that this game will study 'love and family' and we know how much he's drawn to the controversial. We're excited about this project – while the majority of *Metal Gear Solid V* remains concealed behind a wall of intrigue, *Ground Zeroes* is slowly being revealed to us. It all seems like part of Kojima's plan to drip feed information, keeping excitement alive for his newest title. It's certainly working.

> "Ground Zeroes has been designed to introduce key elements, allowing [players] to fully benefit from all that the new game will offer"
>
> HIDEO KOJIMA KOJIMA PRODUCTIONS





■ Left: With the focus on 'family' apparently being prevalent in *Ground Zeroes*, we think Kojima might push the boundaries of mature issues further than we've seen in gaming before.





1



Lego The Hobbit

CONCEPT ■ Following in the footprints of *Lego The Lord Of The Rings*, Traveller's Tales gives Peter Jackson's trilogy adaptation of *The Hobbit* a Lego twist.

Why it'll be better than the movies

Unlike Peter Jackson's ambitious silver screen retelling of J.R.R. Tolkien's novel *The Hobbit*, Traveller's Tales doesn't require three individual instalments to tell the tale of Bilbo Baggins and his company of dwarves journeying across Middle-earth. No, it needs two. Perhaps because very little happens in the first film. Set during the events of the first two parts of the cinematic trilogy, *An Unexpected Journey* and *The Desolation Of Smaug*, player's can look forward to the usual blend of Lego adventuring gameplay combined with a smattering of satire that'll lampoon the po-faced pondering that bogged down the exhausting films.

In fact, we'd go as far to say that the Lego rendition of events might just improve on the films. After all, the source material was aimed at a far younger audience than its sequel, *The Lord Of The Rings*, a fact seemingly lost amidst the brooding dwarves and bloodied battlefields featured, and overwriting the sequence of events with Lego's humour might just capture the magic that made the original book so beloved.

1 ADDING PERSONALITY

One of the fundamental problems with the two films to date is that a significant portion of the huge cast of characters, despite a marathon running time, weren't given a lot to do. It's encouraging then that Tales is attempting to inject a little more personality into each member of the company. All of the dwarves have their own unique ability that can be used to get out of various scrapes – for instance, Bombur has a 'belly-bounce' move that enables other characters to use his sizeable paunch as a trampoline.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: UK
Publisher: WB Games
Developer: TT Games
Release: TBA 2014
Genre: Action adventure
Players: 1-2

Developer Profile

Traveller's Tales has been operating since the early Nineties with a slew of popular licensed titles, but didn't find major success until it teamed up with Lego for its now iconic series of *Lego Star Wars* games. It continues to predominantly produce brick-based gaming products based on popular film franchises.

Developer History

Lego Marvel Super Heroes **2013 [Multi]**

Lego City Undercover **2013 [Wii U]**

Lego Star Wars: The Video Game **2005 [Multi]**

Puggsy **1993 [Mega Drive]**

High Point

While each of the studio's various Lego titles has capitalised on various fan service, last year's *Lego Marvel Super Heroes* possibly gave the most faithful interactive incarnation of Marvel's roster of superheroes yet.

"Our family-friendly take on these thrilling adventures will have kids and parents playing and laughing together as they build and explore in Lego Middle-earth"

TOM STONE, TT GAMES





2 A SOUND DECISION

Following in the footsteps of *Lego The Lord Of The Rings* – which was the first Lego title to utilise a film's original vocal track – *The Hobbit* will likewise use the voices of the actors lifted directly from the film. That's great in the case of Martin Freeman's excellent portrayal of the blundering Bilbo and Ian McKellen's eccentric Gandalf, but less so in the whiny and exposition-heavy exchanges featuring the major dwarf characters. Still, there's plenty of humour already present in the existing dialogue.

3 MORE MIDDLE-EARTH

Even if you've battled your way through the majority of games based on *The Lord Of The Rings*, chances are *The Hobbit* will feature a few locations you might be unfamiliar with. While it'll spend plenty of time sucking up the bucolic charm of The Shire and its neighbouring rolling hills, things get more exciting as the game heads into the elven kingdom of Mirkwood, the riverine Lake-town and beneath The Lonely Mountain into Smaug's domain. Sure, it might just be Lego, but any opportunity to explore more of Middle-earth is a welcome one.

4 IT'S ONLY TWO OF THE FILMS

This will be a sticking point for some fans, as the announcement of *Lego The Hobbit* comes with the news that it'll only adapt the first two films in the trilogy, leaving the door open for the possibility of another game based solely on the last act of the sprawling multi-part cinematic epic. It's an odd choice, and while the announcement specifically states that it's only the two films being given the Lego treatment here, we're not entirely convinced that it won't incorporate the events of the final film given that both are scheduled to arrive in 2014.

5 IT'S LEGO!

It can't be overstated that the inimitable combination of accessibility and compulsion that fuels Lego videogames has given the juggernaut franchise such evergreen appeal. *The Hobbit* doesn't tamper with the formula too much, with minor additions made to systems present in *Lego The Lord Of The Rings* – such as an expansion of the inventory system that includes crafting – but the gameplay staples of harvesting studs and construction objects matched with Tolkien's world will be more than enough to make it a worthwhile adventure.



INFORMATION

Details

Format: Multi
Origin: Poland
Publisher: Warner Bros Interactive Entertainment
Developer: Techland
Release: 2014
Genre: Survival-Horror
Players: TBA

Developer Profile

Techland was founded back in 1991 and seem to have an affinity for the undead – before working on *Dying Light*, the developer was known for its work on the *Dead Island* series, which brought zombie-horror games back to the fore.

High Point

Despite some technical issues, *Dead Island* was an atmospheric tour of an undead tropical paradise that had the feel of a subversive grindhouse gore flick – not one for the faint-hearted.

Developer History

Dead Island: Riptide
Multi [2013]
Nail'd
Multi [2010]
Call Of Juarez
Multi [2006]

Dying Light

CONCEPT ■ It's *Mirror's Edge* meets *Dead Island*, via *Dead Rising*, *BioShock* and *Half-Life*. Throw in a day-night cycle with nocturnal super-zombies and you've got yourself a game.

Rule No 1: Cardio

It's generally agreed that *Mirror's Edge* was a pretty good game, right? It's stylish depiction of free-running inspired a whole glut of gamers to get into parkour (well, at least *virtual* parkour). As we all know, *Mirror's Edge* – like any game – would have been made better with one thing: zombies. At a very basic level, that's the premise of *Dying Light* – there's a huge, open-world city infested with zombies, and your most effective tool against them is your free-running agility.

Techland has a history of releasing games that, admittedly, have their fair share of flaws, but no-one seems to mind that much. If you're a fan of the brain-munching undead, then there's very little that can deter you from a game that pits you against them. Just look at the colonies of *Left 4 Dead* fans, the legions of *Call Of Duty* 'zombies' fanatics, the hoards of *Dead Rising* enthusiasts – a good zombie game does tend to attract a clan of devout followers.

This is why we're so excited about *Dying Light* – where *Dead Island* felt a little bloated and substance-over-style, *Dying Light* seems genuinely fascinating. With a wealth of ambitious mechanics, a Brazilian shantytown setting contributing gorgeous visuals (courtesy of Chrome Engine 6) and challenging, dynamic enemies, we anticipate an offering markedly better than Techland's previous titles. What we've seen of the game so far captures that feverish and adrenaline-fuelled atmosphere that prevails in zombie TV and cinema, but is often found lacking in videogames. The parkour elements make it feel like you're genuinely running for your life, and that is certainly something we want to experience (from the comfort of our sofas, at least).

IT'S BEHIND YOU!

■ THROUGHOUT THE gameplay we've seen, your protagonist occasionally looks backwards as he's running away. This has both aesthetic and functional purposes – aesthetically, it gives the chase a feeling of genuine terror whereas, functionally, it serves to mark your distance from your pursuing foes without having to snap out of the first-person perspective. We're not sure if the turn of the head is player prompted or scripted, though – we're hoping for the former.



NIGHT TERRORS

PERHAPS THE most important feature of the game (and where it got its title from), *Dying Light* operates on a day/night cycle: during daylight, scrounge, search and salvage while bumping off easy foes. At night, the zombies change, evolving into more powerful breeds like the Volatile, who – like *BioShock*'s Big Daddies – require a lot more thought and effort to subdue.

DON'T CALL IT AN FPS

ALTHOUGH YOU assume the first-person perspective, don't make the mistake of calling this a first-person shooter – there are precious few guns in *Dying Light*. The few rifles and handguns that there are seem to be under the control of a paramilitary force that have taken over the playable city, so you have to make do with melee weapons and some inventive crafting – no doubt inspired by *Dead Rising*.

■ *The Witness* is only outlined as a timed exclusive for PlayStation 4, which means it might make its way onto rival consoles at some point in the future.



WORKING ON A PLAYSTATION 4 EXCLUSIVE

ONE OF THE earliest announcements for PS4, which was initially scheduled as a release window title, *The Witness* signalled Sony's next-gen hardware as the new home for indie development. "It's a modern machine that has a lot of memory, a much faster CPU than previous-gen consoles, and is easier to develop for than the PS3. This lets us build a game that looks nice without requiring us to have a team of ten programmers porting it," says Blow of the advantages of working on the system. He even points out a specific feature he likes, despite it not being suited to his game. "I really like the PS4's streaming stuff, and have had fun using it so far, but I don't think *The Witness* is the ideal case for that stuff."

■ Above: Blow and his team update the-witness.net regularly with fresh screenshots and insight into the development process of the long-awaited title. Right: One of the most intriguing aspects of *The Witness* is just how little we know about the game at this stage. Blow has kept story details under wraps, only showing off the setting and outlining the various puzzle types players can expect to find.



The Witness

CONCEPT ■ Stuck on an island, players must unravel a series of increasingly perplexing puzzles to solve the mystery behind the idyllic backdrop.

Jonathan Blow discusses his follow-up to Braid

Jonathan Blow explains that, "Most adventure games require you to do arbitrary and unrelated things in order to solve puzzles. These things are governed by 'if' statements: '*If* the player does thing X with object Y in room Z, the puzzle is solved'. One problem that happens is puzzles that only make sense when thinking backwards from knowing the solution, the way the designer was thinking about it, but make no sense or feel completely unmotivated when thinking forward through the situation, the way the player would. This leads to a game that is kind of unplayable, but it happens very often."

Blow is talking about the common flaws found in modern adventure games that he and his team working on *The Witness* at Number None are trying to avoid during the development of the studio's ambitious follow-up to *Braid*. The enigmatic adventure game was unveiled back in 2011 when Blow first invited **games™** to take a trip around the mysterious island that serves as the setting for *The Witness*. The various districts of its vibrant tropical expanse are divided by a series of visually curious constructs and distinctive architecture – why? Well, that remains unknown at this point – each is unlocked through a series of puzzles that are found across a series of LCD panels littered through the world. "Another thing that happens [in some puzzle games] is that you don't even know if something is a puzzle you should be solving," Blow exclaims. "When I try to open this door, it says it's locked, but does that mean I am trying to get a key for it, or do I unlock it from the other side later, or is it just 'locked' because it is just part of the background scenery I am not supposed to try and go through at all, ever?"

To avoid these kinds of problems, as Blow sees it, *The Witness* approaches puzzles differently. It builds a system of interaction through the operation of the aforementioned LCD panels that establish how to solve puzzles to advance. "All puzzles behave according to the same system, so there is never any ambiguity about what you are trying to do or how you do it," clarifies Blow. "The only question is what the answer is to this particular puzzle. You can think of the LCD panels as providing an extremely streamlined user interface for communicating with the game world. This means that most of the confusion and flailing involved in older adventure games is gone, and you can get more of a flow of puzzle-solving gameplay, the way racing games, fighting games and *Tetris* have flow."

> "If you're challenging yourself and trying new things, you always get better at what you do"
>
> JONATHAN BLOW NUMBER NONE

/// There's no denying that it's a hugely ambitious project for Blow, jumping from a linear level-based 2D platformer to a vast open 3D world – with the engine built entirely from scratch. Not content with simply iterating on his previous achievements, Blow regards the process of working with a team of people and expanding his toolset while working on *The Witness* as an immense challenge that has changed his perspective of game design. "Well, if you're challenging yourself and trying new things, you always get better at what you do," he says. "Yes, *The Witness* is a different scale of production than *Braid*, so I am learning some things about how to run a small team, how to keep a game feeling personal and thematically coherent when a lot of people are working on it, et cetera. But every game is different and the new skills I have built when making *The Witness* may or may not transfer to the next game."

Which shouldn't be too long, by the sounds of it. Asked what ambitions he has once work has completed on *The Witness*, Blow refers to some ideas and concepts that he'd like to explore in the future. And, he says, you can count on his follow-up to *The Witness* to make similar progressive steps into unknown territory.

"If we were to make *The Witness 2* with the same engine and the same style of puzzles, just with 'new content', then the situation would be pretty straightforward," he concludes. "But we are not going to do that."

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC, PlayStation 4
Origin: US
Publisher: Number None
Developer: In-house
Release: TBC 2014
Genre: Puzzle
Players: 1

Developer Profile

While Jonathan Blow has only released one game to date, *Braid*, the opinionated developer has been a contributor to the industry for a number of years through his writing and contributing to Indie Game Jam. Blow was also in *Indie Game: The Movie*, where he discussed his role as an independent developer.

Developer History

The Witness
2014 [PC, PS4]
Braid
2008 [Multi]

High Point

His debut title *Braid* is a thrilling and involving platformer that twists conventions of the genre and conveys an intimate story beneath the terrific execution of its gameplay.





■ Left: Blow cryptically posted a mirrored image of *The Witness* on his blog that suggests the PC release of the title will support burgeoning VR tech Oculus Rift. It's another encouraging sign as indie support for the hardware continues to grow.



DayZ

CONCEPT The ultimate survival game, *DayZ* places you in a vast open world populated by the undead and – even worse – other players.

Dean Hall's magnum opus is poised to change how we look at survival-horror

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PC
Origin: Czech Republic
Publisher: Bohemia Interactive
Developer: In-house
Release: Out now (early access)
Genre: Survival-horror
Players: MMO

Developer Profile

Dean 'Rocket' Hall, New Zealand's favourite son (since Peter Jackson, anyway), has become something of a hero in the indie scene after creating *DayZ* as a mod for PC military simulator *Arma II*. The idea for the mod came from his time in the military and went on to become a phenomenon in the PC scene, as well as becoming the most intense and terrifying PvP experience available.

Developer History

DayZ (Arma II mod) **2012 [PC]**

High Point

Dean Hall's hard work on a free mod paid off when, in 2012, it was confirmed that *Arma II*'s *DayZ* mod had accrued over one million unique users after only being available for four months.

After months of delays, Dean Hall's ambitious project made it onto Steam as an early access release back in December. The standalone version of the unique survival-horror is still in an early alpha state and, as such, is far from being the complete product, though it is available to play on Steam as it stands now. Despite being nowhere near finished, *DayZ* has already sold over one million copies in its first month on Steam, a truly staggering achievement given that at the height of its powers, the original *DayZ* mod for *Arma II* – the genesis of this standalone version – cultivated one million users in *four* months.

In common with the previous mod there are bugs, and Bohemia hasn't shied away from them – it's made explicitly clear on the game's Steam page that it is far from finished and for users to expect a fair few issues. Although, the debate remains as to whether consumers should have to spend £19.99 on a game build that is so far from completion. What it does mean for Hall and Bohemia is as much free playtesting as each party could possibly hope for; the perfect litmus test for their product.

Below: It's not just the zombies that you have to worry about in *DayZ*, the other players that simultaneously roam the world are just as dangerous.



"Our motto is that if it's worth doing, it's worth doing well"
DEAN HALL BOHEMIAN INTERACTIVE

Below: Dean Hall has often described the game as being made up of stories and it's the way that players interact with each other that has fuelled the title's most inspiring tales.

"I'd really like to encourage anyone thinking about buying *DayZ* when we release on [Steam] Early Access to critically review the game before they purchase," Hall tells us. "It's going to be very bare, and buying into the project now is not going to be for everyone. For those who aren't happy with the progress they can always buy the game later once they see the project growing."

Hall and Bohemia have also mentioned that they'd like to see the game enter beta testing this year, although considering the length of development so far – it is an *extremely* ambitious project, after all – we wouldn't be surprised if the process was slower than that. "We went right back to the drawing board with the architecture, and our motto is that if it's worth doing, it's worth doing well." Hall says, intimating how big a job it has been to turn the game into a full experience.

DayZ is rumoured to be coming to consoles in the future, although Hall has been quick to point out that this won't happen until the PC version is in a finished state. From our experience with both the *Arma II* mod and the new standalone version, we can comfortably say that this is one to keep an eye on if you are a console gamer. And as for PC owners, the current build is the perfect opportunity to contribute towards the finished game through testing, even if it is fairly rough around the edges. The sales figures speak for themselves – *DayZ* is rewriting the rules of survival-horror.


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Deep Down

CONCEPT ■ Capcom's PS4-exclusive offering takes knights of yore into randomly-generated dungeons to kill dragons… except it doesn't because it's all set in the future somehow.

Into the mouth of hell we march

For a long time, Capcom rested on its laurels – banking on its old tried-and-tested franchises to ensure consistent sales and profit margins. Capcom isn't Nintendo, though – its IP isn't as strong or enduring as its Japanese competitor and eventually this reliance on old favourites dried up, landing the company in troubled water. We're happy to see, then, that Capcom is keen to roll with the punches and adapt – *Deep Down*, as a concept and a game, looks like something completely new for Capcom, and that excites us.

On first examination, *Deep Down* doesn't seem to promise much. It's a free-to-play title, and we all know the implications that label carries, but we'd argue the free-to-play model is a better approach to keeping a game monetised than locking out on-disc content and asking for extortionate prices on pathetic DLC (we're looking at you, *Street Fighter X Tekken*). This is Capcom's first foray into the console-based free-to-play domain, and we're hoping that the shift away from DLC dependence indicates a self-awareness within the company; this could be the beginning of the end of 'horse armour' DLC.

Deep Down is a curious chimera of a game – seemingly composed of various strands of other series' DNA. Taking the multiplayer monster hunting of, well, *Monster Hunter*, the futuristic time-regression of *Assassin's Creed*'s animus, the dungeon-crawling of *Dark Souls* and the looting of *Borderlands* wasn't enough for *Deep Down* – so Capcom completed its experiment by making the whole thing revolve around procedurally-generated dungeons, too.

/// We think the whole game could be a playable tech demo for Capcom's new Panta Rhei engine – the company's replacement for the aging MT Framework it's been using since *Dead Rising*. Panta Rhei is an old Greek saying, meaning 'everything flows', and that's clearly the design philosophy kept in mind with *Deep Down* – the game is good looking, blending fantasy settings with photorealistic visuals; light sources are defined and illuminate the high-resolution textures sharply and realistically, the particle effects are astounding and the collision detection is smooth and responsive. The Panta Rhei engine was apparently designed parallel to the game, with Capcom working closely with Sony to better understand the PS4's native power. This shows.

But that's all style – the substance is also impressive. We were reminded of a paired-down *Dark Souls*; combat isn't particularly inspiring or complicated, it's all lunges and vague evasive moves, compounded with projectile elemental attacks, time freezing spells and summoned barriers. Movement feels weighted and dangerous – like *Dark Souls*, you feel like your character really is a knight, the pressure of all that plate armour weighing their limbs down, making timing and choosing where to strike essential. Combat becomes tricky once enemies start building up in number, and this is when you have to consider which spells and skills can be deployed to greatest effect. We imagine this is where the four-player co-op will really come into its own; with a variety of knights, all loaded out with various abilities and weapons, we envisage slow descents into deep dungeons – bastardised MMO raids that'll suit the play style of this kind of game.

> "Panta Rhei is an old Greek saying, meaning 'everything flows', and that's clearly the design philosophy kept in mind with Deep Down"

Deep Down is an experiment, then – an ambitious and tentative step by Capcom into the new generation. We're keen for more information, particularly on how the futuristic narrative framework of the whole thing comes into play – will different items take you to different kinds of dungeons, for example? We're also interested in how the monetisation of the title will pan out – we feel Capcom have something genuinely interesting here, and we'd hate to see it sullied by a game-wrecking reliance on premium content or level barriers. If nothing else, though, *Deep Down* is a reassuring example of what Panta Rhei can do – if this is how it functions at the start of the generation, imagine what it'll look like by the time we're at *Street Fighter VII*.

INFORMATION

Details

Format: PlayStation 4
Origin: Japan
Publisher: Capcom
Developer: In-House
Release: 2014
Genre: Dungeon crawler
Players: 1-4

Developer Profile

Capcom – a developer and publisher that needs no introduction. Responsible for some of the most notable Japanese franchises in gaming history; from *Resident Evil* to *Mega Man*, *Devil May Cry* to *Street Fighter*, the company has enjoyed consistent popularity and prestige since its inception in 1983.

Developer History

Dead Rising 3 **2013 [Xbox One]**
Lost Planet 3 **2013 [Multi]**
Resident Evil 6 **2012 [Multi]**

High Point

Among its many titles, we have to say Capcom's best offering is *Ōkami*; visually appealing, unique and touching, it was a refreshing platformer produced at a time the genre was stagnating.





■ Above: The futuristic framework of the narrative intrigues us – is *Deep Down* slyly poking at *Assassin's Creed*, or is it unashamedly stealing ideas?



QUOTH THE RAVEN

LITTLE IS KNOWN about the narrative side of *Deep Down* at the minute; all we know is that you play as a Raven, one of a group of people that can read the residual memories of objects and use them to go back through history (like the Animus, but instead of Desmond's mind, you go into that of, say, a brick). The story starts when the Ravens are tasked with exploring some recently uncovered ruins in the Czech Republic that date back to the 15th Century – so they must leave behind their native 2094 New York and explore these mystical depths. Honestly, we're more excited about what the game will offer rather than the story, but we could be pleasantly surprised.

Left: We have no idea how this watery stag will attack, considering it's mostly comprised of harmless transparent fluid. It looks like Capcom is just showing off its new engine here – look at the light refracting through its shimmering body. Gorgeous. Below: Our favourite aspect of *Deep Down* so far is the lighting engine – we hope the shadows and God rays look as good in the final build.

SHOWCASE

MORE TITLES TO WATCH FOR ON THE GAMING HORIZON

HYRULE WARRIORS

Format: **Wii U**
Publisher: **Nintendo**
Developer: **Nintendo, Tecmo Koei**
ETA: **2014**



A GAME that absolutely no one could have predicted, *Hyrule Warriors* takes the hack-and-slash template of *Dynasty Warriors* and applies it to the *Zelda* universe. The title won't be an instalment in the main canon of *The Legend Of Zelda*, but rather a spin-off – veteran *Zelda* developer Aonuma stays on-board as a producer, too. We think the game has a lot of potential; Link's swords, bombs and bow actually fit snugly into a *Warriors*-style system.

ELITE: DANGEROUS

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Frontier**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **April 2014**



ALTHOUGH ECLIPSED by *Star Citizen* in terms of Kickstarter funding, work on the eagerly-anticipated space sequel continues, with backers treated to a combat alpha over the Christmas period. By all accounts it's fast, frenetic and looks fantastic, which bodes well for the final release, although we have a sneaking suspicion that the game will slip to the autumn, just in time to celebrate the original's 30th anniversary. Right on, Commander!

PERSONA 5

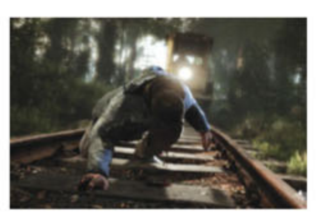
Format: **PS3**
Publisher: **Atlus**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **Winter 2014**



POWERED BY Atlus' new internal engine, *Persona 5* aims to take the series down a darker route. The title retains the series' high-school setting, but will focus more on the restraints and chains imposed on today's youth by the expectations of society. *Persona* has always been fairly dark, but with Atlus deciding to use full-scale character models to promote realism, we reckon this game could be the series' most pessimistic offering yet.

THE VANISHING OF ETHAN CARTER

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **The Astronauts**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2014**



A GORGEOUS looking game, *The Vanishing Of Ethan Carter* promises to take players on a weird, occult journey. Playing as Paul Prospero (a nod to the game's heavily literature-inspired roots), you're tasked with finding the missing, eponymous boy. Exploring the locale of Red Creek Valley, you must use a mix of supernatural powers and detective sleuthing to unravel the mystery that weighs heavy on the town.

BLAZBLUE: CHRONOPHANTASMA

Format: **PS3**
Publisher: **Aksys Games**
Developer: **Arc System Works**
ETA: **March 2014**



THE SEQUEL to *BlazBlue: Continuum Shift*, the ridiculously named *Chronophantasma* introduces four new characters and sees all returning characters take to the battlefield with new, re-drawn sprites – each receiving a rebalance, too. Gold Bursts have been removed and replaced with Overdrives; special moves that stop the round timer and last longer depending on how low your fighter's health is.

PERSONA 4: DANCING ALL NIGHT

Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Atlus**
Developer: **Atlus, Dingo**
ETA: **Winter 2014**



THE THING with successful franchises is that they'll eventually spawn nonsensical spin-offs – *Persona* is a series susceptible to this fate due to its setting in both domestic and surreal worlds. *Dancing All Night* transports players back to the 'Other World' to engage in dance battles against Shadows. A far cry from *Persona*'s roots, maybe, but a promising and different kind of game.

THE MANDATE

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **Perihelion Interactive**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **Winter 2014**



A FULL-SCALE sci-fi RPG in the vein of *Mass Effect*, *The Mandate* promises a galaxy that responds to the choices you make, replete with the option to raid enemy ships, defend yourself from sieges and command a fully responsive chain of command aboard your own ship. An incredibly promising and successful Kickstarter project, *The Mandate* already has a text adventure and interactive prologue available.

MASS EFFECT 4

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **EA**
Developer: **BioWare**
ETA: **2014**

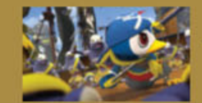


THERE ISN'T a lot of information set in stone about *Mass Effect 4* – we know it won't feature Shepard as the main character, and we know it's being produced in Frostbite 3. That's about it – everything else is speculation. It's almost certain to release on next-gen consoles, and with the new hardware and Frostbite 3 combined, we can expect a stunningly rich sci-fi galaxy with phenomenally rendered aliens.



DELAYED – SoulCalibur: Lost Swords (PS3)

The free-to-play Namco Bandai title suffered a setback into 2014. Considering *Lost Swords* will be offered as a strictly single-player affair, we can't help but wonder what else needs to be done to a game modelled on *SoulCalibur V*…

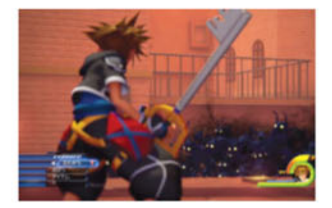


DELAYED – Kaio: King Of Pirates (3DS)

Keiji Inafune's project seems destined to sit in purgatory – announced in 2011, everyone seems to have forgotten about *Kaio*. Maybe that's because Inafune's hard at work on *Yaiba: Ninja Gaiden Z*, *Soul Sacrifice* and *Mighty No 9*…

KINGDOM HEARTS III

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **2015**



WE'RE STILL ages away from the release of *Kingdom Hearts III*, but at least some information about the game has begun to flow. One of the game's main systems is 'Flowmotion', a mechanic that allows you to pull off contextual moves specific to boss fights or environments. The Keyblade, too, has received an upgrade – it's no longer just a weapon; apparently it will shape shift and become useful for navigating the diverse *Kingdom Hearts* worlds.

BORDERLANDS 2

Format: **PS Vita**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **Gearbox Software, Iron Galaxy Studios**
ETA: **2014**



RUMOURS ABOUND that the PS Vita port of the loot-'em-up will see a March release, but we're not convinced we'll see Gearbox's acclaimed FPS that soon. We're also dubious about just how full a port the Vita can handle – the game is *huge* and gorgeous, too. The Vita's a powerful device, but is it capable of running a full, high-powered PS3 game? We really hope so, because if we can get four-player co-op on the go, we'll be over the moon.

MURDERED: SOUL SUSPECT

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Square Enix**
Developer: **Airtight Games**
ETA: **Spring 2014**



MURDERED: SOUL *Suspect* is built around a question: what happens to a guy that gets murdered and has to solve the case of his own death as a ghost? The story itself sounds reminiscent of *Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective* to us, but the developer claims it wasn't even aware of that game at the time of development. We're happy to see Square Enix taking risks in publishing daring new IP like this, we just hope the gamble pays off.

TRANSISTOR

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Supergiant Games**
Developer: **In-House**
ETA: **Spring 2014**



CONSIDERING HOW attached we get to some of our weapons in games, we've always thought it a shame that we never really get to interact with them. *Transistor* puts paid to that – playing as Red, you come into the possession of the titular Transistor sword; a talking weapon that your enemies will stop at nothing to take back from you. The title promises to fuse strategic planning and fast-paced combat with a beautiful techno-city.

VALIANT HEARTS: THE GREAT WAR

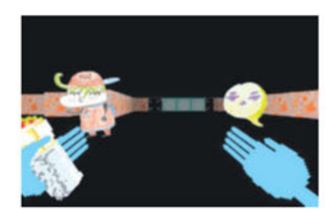
Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Ubisoft**
Developer: **Ubisoft Montpellier**
ETA: **2014**



WE WILL never get tired of games powered by UbiArt Framework, especially when those games seem to have a unique tone and premise to work with. *Valiant Hearts* focusses on four strangers that are brought together by a German soldier searching for his love during the Great War. Inspired by real letters written during WW1, *Valiant Hearts* promises to be both emotional and intriguing.

BURRITO GALAXY

Format: **PC**
Publisher: **magdev, mushbuh**
Developer: **magdev, mushbuh**
ETA: **2014**



THE FULL title of this game is actually *Burrito Galaxy 64: Mega-Tortilla Bean Saga 30X6 - Planetoid SAL-5A XIV Director's Cut: Extreme Edition*, but that wouldn't fit in our title box. The game is a puzzle-based FPS that seems to focus on Guac, 'the first female bean commander in burrito galaxy' who is on a mission to 'slap, burp and swack [her] way through couples of puzzles, some of dungeons and two of boss'.

GOD EATER 2

Format: **PS Vita, PSP**
Publisher: **Namco Bandai Games**
Developer: **Shift**
ETA: **2014**



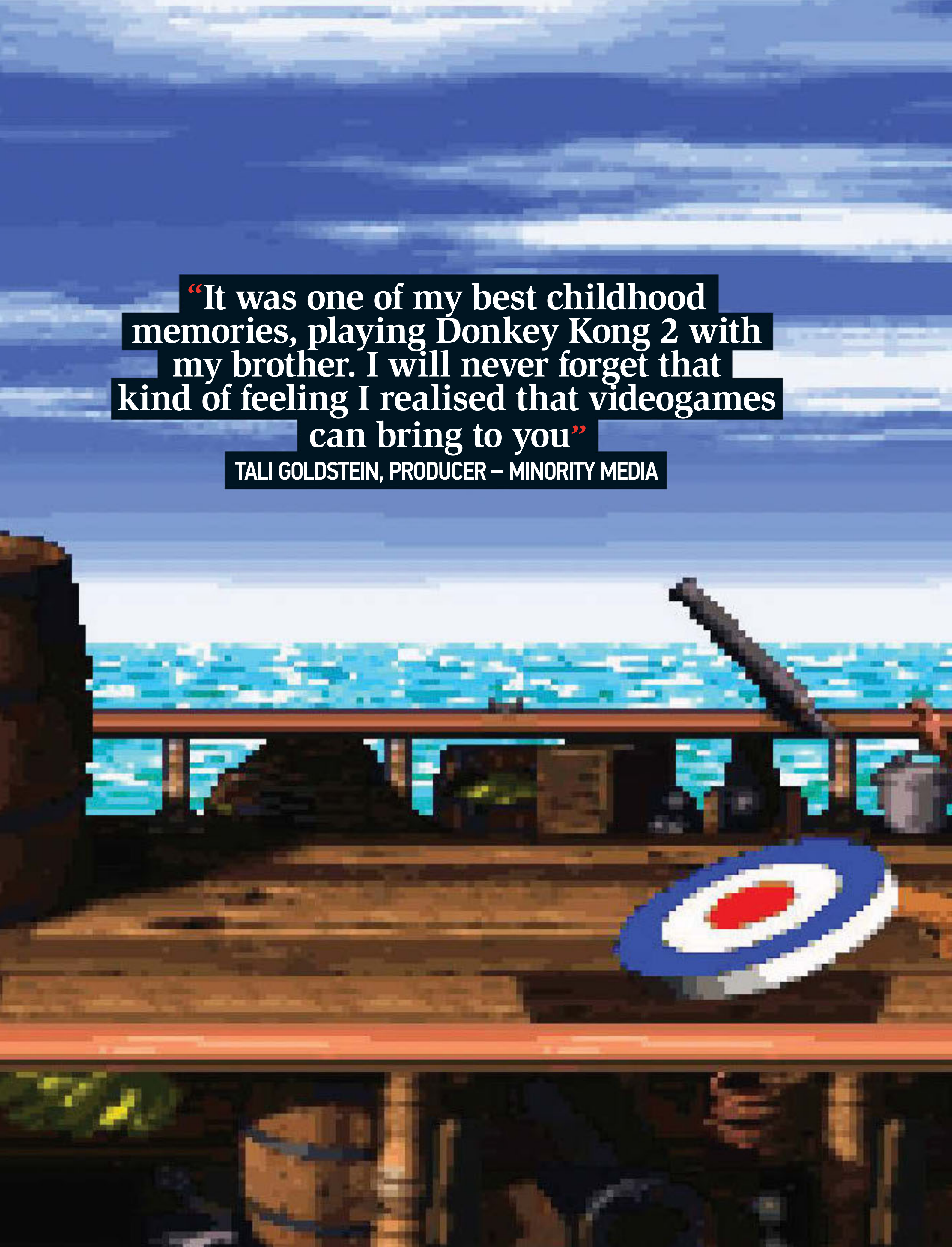
AFTER THE uninspiring sales of the first *God Eater* in the West, we're not certain we'll see a Western localisation of the game, which would be a shame. With anime-inspired character designs contrasting with grotesque monster design, *God Eater 2* is both aesthetically and mechanically sound as a Vita title, offering a more accessible experience than the *Monster Hunter* series that inspired it.

HOHOKUM

Format: **Multi**
Publisher: **Sony Computer Entertainment**
Developer: **Honeyslug**
ETA: **2014**

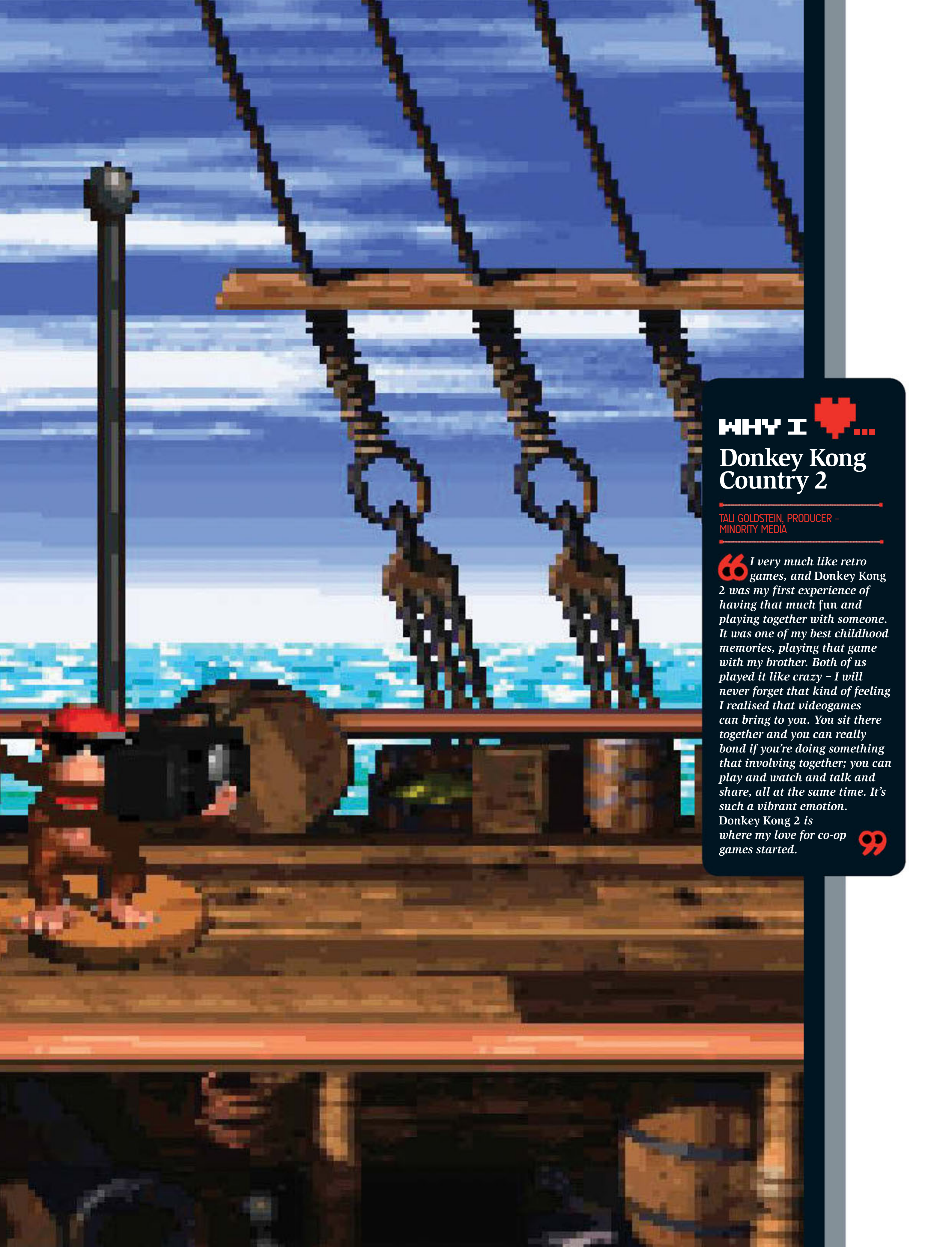


AN INTERESTING and relaxing game, *Hohokum* subverts gaming tropes by having no score, no time limit and precious few objectives. You play as the Long Mover, and the title entertains you purely by prompting exploration. The development team sees *Hohokum* as a 'playground' – a place to wander about at your own pace, with the dynamic soundtrack adapting to contextual cues.



"It was one of my best childhood memories, playing Donkey Kong 2 with my brother. I will never forget that kind of feeling I realised that videogames can bring to you"

TALI GOLDSTEIN, PRODUCER – MINORITY MEDIA



WHY I ♥...

Donkey Kong Country 2

TALI GOLDSTEIN, PRODUCER – MINORITY MEDIA

I very much like retro games, and Donkey Kong 2 *was my first experience of having that much fun and playing together with someone. It was one of my best childhood memories, playing that game with my brother. Both of us played it like crazy – I will never forget that kind of feeling I realised that videogames can bring to you. You sit there together and you can really bond if you're doing something that involving together; you can play and watch and talk and share, all at the same time. It's such a vibrant emotion.* Donkey Kong 2 *is where my love for co-op games started.*

VALVE'S CONSOLE KILLER

AFTER YEARS OF RUMOURS, HALF-LIFE DEVELOPER VALVE HAS FINALLY UNVEILED ITS PLANS TO TAKE ON THE HOME CONSOLE. BUT WHAT ARE ITS CHANCES OF SURVIVAL? AND IS IT SIMPLY ENOUGH FOR CASUAL GAMERS TO GET ON BOARD? **GAMES™** TAKES A LOOK AT THE INDUSTRY'S RESPONSE AND WEIGHS UP THE IMPACT THE STEAM MACHINE WILL HAVE ON THE WAY WE PLAY GAMES





VALVE'S LONG AWAITED Steam Machines aren't just the dark horse candidate in this generation's console war, but a declaration of intent against Microsoft. Although, at first glance it might not seem like it, given that it looks like little more than a range of PCs intended to be plugged into your TV. But in reality, they're part of a two-pronged assault – to cut the legs out from under both Xbox One and PS4 in the living room, as well as renew the independence of the platform by severing Microsoft's control over it in the bedroom and study, if not necessarily the office. It's an ambitious plan, and a potentially industry-changing gamble. It's also one of the most important in the PC platform's history, with the potential to ensure it still has a future.

A PC FOR EVERYONE

Before we get to that though, here's a quick primer. Steam Machines are custom-built PCs designed to fit neatly in the lounge, running the open source operating system Linux (specifically Debian) reworked for both Valve's Steam platform and gaming needs in general – graphics technology in particular. Switch it on, and you'll get something similar to the current Big Picture mode for browsing and interaction, complete with all the features of Steam on Windows, and your existing library. Linux compatible games will run natively. For Windows ones, Valve has a workaround involving another PC and your home network.

Instead of a single one-size-fits-all Steam Machine though, Valve is working with a number of hardware partners to create a whole range of different designs, much as no one company has a monopoly on the PC. First generation partners include Alienware, Scan, Origin PC, Digital Storm and Falcon Northwest, each with »

Alienware plans to release a new edition of its Steam machine every year, starting this September. Expect the price to be comparable to an Xbox One.

very different designs and specifications in mind. Valve itself has a prototype machine, currently with 300 lucky users, and will at least initially be manufacturing the device's controllers, but has no plans to create a retail box. In time, the controllers too will be manufactured by third parties, with Valve just handling software.

This couldn't be further from Microsoft/Sony's approach of building one machine, and thus controlling both the hardware and software. As far as the kit goes, Valve CEO Gabe Newell summed up the company's scatter-gun approach at the initial unveiling at this year's CES show as "The PC is successful because we're all benefiting from the competition with each other. That has been the engine of this growth." Steam Machines are in short intended to become their own ecosystem, where stylish and well-built machines simply float to the top, but there's nothing stopping someone creating something as mass produced and stripped to the bone as the average set-top media centre if they choose. Home users will also be able to download the software and install it on any PC they like, completely free. So the question remains: why would anyone want this? Who is the market here?



Valve has been consistent with its PC games. Can it match its quality record when it comes to hardware design? Time will tell.

In theory, multiplatform games should be easier to port from console to SteamOS. Whether they will be is another matter, of course.



While the PC currently lacks a *Halo* or *Uncharted* scale platform exclusive – though nothing else comes close to its indie scene – Steam Machines tap into many of its advantages. In terms of power, for instance, 1080p graphics are nothing to even a mid-level PC rig and higher end ones can absolutely blow away the competition. They'll launch with a better back catalogue than any console, due to providing access to at least anything already purchased on Steam (and potentially other PC games too – though even if Valve doesn't support them, it'll be possible to dual-boot into Windows and run anything).

On a software level, just about everything that is currently available with Steam should be included, including Steam Workshop for integrated modding, cloud saving of games and preferences across platforms, and upcoming family options for the client that will give everyone their own saves and achievements and even lists of games in the interface. Online, it should also be factored in that Valve doesn't charge for multiplayer or premium services, though of course individual companies can still have subscriptions and in-game purchases if they use Steam Wallet.

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD



To actually make any of this work isn't going to be easy. Just for starters, and it's something of a big one, Linux has never been a gaming operating system. While this is partly because of licensing issues and partly due to being treated like the runt of the litter when it comes to drivers, it's mostly because most PC games are written using Microsoft's DirectX technologies. Breaking into the living room also means fighting both Microsoft and Sony in an area that Valve has never shown much interest in – marketing. It's never had to worry about it, being able to rely on excellent games and word of mouth on the PC to build up a phenomenal reputation and over 65 million registered Steam accounts. Still, there's a big

difference between getting people to sign up to play *Dota 2* and having them shell out hundreds or thousands dollars/pounds for a new PC.

On the hardware level, things are slightly simpler – PCs are easy to make. For consumers though, the sheer number of machines and configurations is guaranteed to be confusing, especially next to consoles. If you buy an Xbox One game, you know it's going to work. The same can't be said of a SteamOS one, which could be using any graphics card, have any amount of RAM or any processor under the hood. Valve originally planned to categorise Steam Machines as easy to understand "Good" (aimed at streaming), "Better" (decent spec) or "Best" (high end), but now it looks like users will be expected to simply do their research.

It's a testament to Valve's reputation that the industry is even considering that it might succeed here. *Minecraft* creator Markus "Notch" Persson has gone so far as to claim "Valve is saving the entire gaming world," with *BioShock* creator Ken Levine saying "I don't think anyone ever lost any money betting on Valve." The idea is certainly enough to get some of the industry's hardware players to at least dip their toe into the water, including Alienware, CyberpowerPC and Falcon Northwest – and not just because a Steam Machine means not having to pay Microsoft for a Windows licence or even have to deal with them at all. "We see SteamOS being a big market for our brand for customers looking to purchase a high-performance system for their home theatre," Harjit Chana of Digital Storm told us. "It's the right form factor and also the operating system is friendly."

"For consumers, the sheer number of machines and configurations is guaranteed to be confusing"

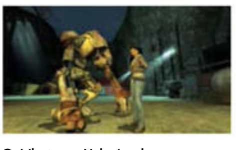




● Indie developers are likely to benefit hugely from the SteamOS platform, as they have done from Steam itself for years.



● Big Picture mode was just the beginning.



● Whatever Valve's plans are for a new *Half-Life*, we're told it won't be exclusive to SteamOS.

Even so, the enthusiasm is tempered with heavy scepticism. Father of the FPS John Carmack for instance, who happily ate humble pie over originally writing off Steam as a digital distribution platform, is only slightly more willing to offer the benefit of the doubt. "I'm afraid that I may be at that same point right now where I'm like, 'Making your own sort of little console OS? Are you crazy?' And, you know, maybe ten years from now, they're going to look like brilliant prophets again with it."

Analyst Michael Pachter of Equity Research is more confident, but only to a point. "They will sell to people who have a lot of money, want a PC game experience on their living room television, and love Valve. That's probably more than a million people, so they have a good chance of making money, but it is unlikely to cut into the overall console market," he says. "If they choose to broaden the appeal by repositioning the device as a media centre, I think they will sell more units, and I think others might have a chance with competing products." Even so, "I think Valve is one of the only companies that can pull this off on the gaming side."

SAVING THE WORLD



There are good reasons for the industry as a whole to hope it succeeds – especially in the wake of Windows 8, a platform described by Newell as "a giant sadness". It was a splash of cold water in many faces, with Microsoft both demonstrating its willingness to unilaterally change how the whole PC platform works by redesigning the whole thing around its Surface tablets and touch-screens, and to take a leaf out of Apple's book with an OS X style App Store where it gets a cut of every sale made.

Both of these reinforced just how easy it would be for Microsoft to lock down the whole platform, and the lack of any escape route if that happened. In gaming especially, it became impossible to ignore that the PC as a platform increasingly exists at the pleasure of a company currently pushing a billion dollars towards convincing the world to buy an Xbox One.

Whether or not Microsoft actually does any of this or not though is largely irrelevant – it's always worth having a Plan B even under a benevolent dictator, and Valve is providing an escape tunnel that the PC has needed for a very long time. True, at first glance it might not seem like it. Valve still »

THE PROTOTYPE STEAM CONTROLLER

VALVE'S REPLACEMENT FOR THE GAMEPAD, MOUSE AND KEYBOARD

DUAL TRACKPADS

Yes, trackpads. They're intended to be used with thumbs, giving precision closer to a mouse, with haptic feedback that can deliver more than a quick rumble – developers getting control over frequency, amplitude and direction. The haptic rumblers can also be used as mini-speakers.

BUTTONS

The initial button configuration is to be refactored with a more traditional combination of directional pad and four face buttons This will improve backwards compatibility at the expense of left/right hand symmetry.

AND IF YOU HATE IT?

Like everything else, Valve intends the controller to be open and hackable. It'll also be possible to attach a mouse and keyboard if you prefer, or an alternate controller that the system can detect.

PROFILES

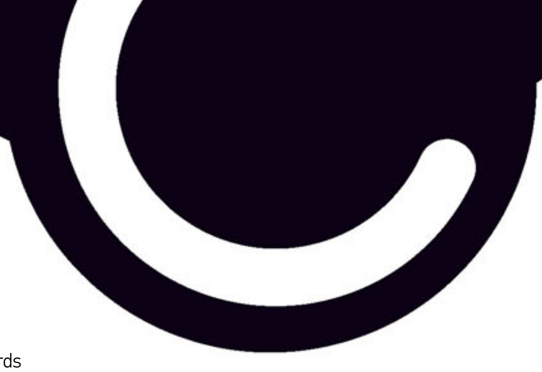
Games designed with Steam Controller in mind will know how to use it. Every game on Steam will support it somehow, with Steam acting as a middle-man if it's expecting another joypad or a mouse/keyboard (though typing won't be fun). Profiles will be sharable online to get up and running immediately.

TOUCHSCREEN

The high-resolution clickable touchscreen was an enticing feature of the beta controller, planned to offer a wealth of overlays and user control. Latest reports are however that the touchscreen will no longer feature, making the Steam controller seem a little less revolutionary.

WHAT'S MISSING?

So far, there's no sign of a microphone/headphone jack, though there's an obvious touchscreen-sized space for push-to-talk. The expectation is that you'll bring your own equipment to the party, ideally via Bluetooth, though that does open up the potential driver issues.



owns Steam after all, and Steam Machines will be geared towards their ecosystem. The improvements that need to be made to Linux for this to happen, though, are ones that everyone can benefit from, offering an alternative for PC games on the desktop as well as Steam Machines in the lounge. Even if Valve did turn evil, its power is limited to their own shop. Nobody can control Linux like Microsoft/Apple control their OSs.

A SWITCH IN TIME



By far the most important steps that Valve is currently taking here is working with 3D graphics juggernaut NVIDIA to improve gaming performance on Linux, and finding ways to make porting to Linux as easy as possible – ports that will be as easy to release standalone as on Steam, unless they tie into its specific technologies like Steamworks. NVIDIA for instance has a suite of tools called GameWorks that combines lighting, graphics and physics into one package and will allow feature parity between Windows and Linux versions of games.

Valve is however under no illusions that this will be an overnight transition. There are currently over 250 games ready to go on SteamOS, but tests have shown that even those need more work to be fully ready – *Metro: Last Light* for instance is looking nowhere near as good in its OpenGL form as its Windows DirectX-based original game. Publishers are also very, very unlikely to take the time to go back and port even a fraction of their back catalogues, meaning that most of the 3000+ games currently on Steam will never see a SteamOS/Linux version.

Valve's plan to get around this is to build in support for in-home streaming. This turns the Steam Machine into a dummy client, working with a dedicated PC elsewhere to stream games directly over your home network to your TV. There'll inevitably be more lag when playing this way than doing so directly on the Steam Machine, so competitive shooters and other highly sensitive genres are likely out. It should be fine for more cerebral or casual games, especially over powerline networking, though the likes of strategy gaming or reading MMO chat windows are unlikely to be much fun if their interfaces were designed with the assumption that players would be sitting a few inches away from the screen rather than lying down or sitting a few feet away. Any genre with an existing foothold on consoles, though, should be fine, along with staples like adventure games, which will think they're being played on a mouse/keyboard. It remains to be seen however if this streaming will extend to non-Steam games.

PC users worried about getting the runaround here shouldn't be too concerned. Games are already written on PC regardless of their destination platform, meaning that the only real chance of developers going SteamOS only is if Microsoft locks things down – the exact time when an option is needed. The main technology shift is from Microsoft's DirectX graphical systems to an alternative called OpenGL, long championed by the likes of John Carmack, which is open to all (and conveniently for porting purposes, is used by the PS4). As with the Xbox One and PS4 though, SteamOS isn't just about gaming. Valve hasn't confirmed any partnerships yet, but Steam Machines will be able to hook into assorted media services – Netflix and Spotify being obvious contenders – and will hopefully support streaming over DLNA for local content and third-party applications both in and out of Steam's library.



● It's easy to forget, but Steam was deeply unpopular at launch, and only took off because Valve forced everyone to use it if they wanted to play *Half-Life 2*.



● Netflix and iPlayer have expanded the reach of current consoles. Valve may have to chase a similar strategy for SteamOS.



● Not all Steam Machines will be created equal – neither in capabilities nor aethestically.

BUT WILL IT WORK?



John Carmack speaks for the industry when he says "If it was some other random company, I would be pseudo-scornful." Almost nobody wants to see Valve fail here, but it's impossible to over-estimate just how big a project it's taking on. Even if you see the machine itself as just a glorified PC – something that can be said for both Xbox One and PS4 – the ambition, the amount of

THE LINUX **DIFFERENCE**

IF IT'S SO GOOD, WHY HASN'T IT EVER TAKEN OFF FOR GAMES?

● Linux is an 'open source' operating system, which means that anyone can both download and build on its original code, and release their own variants – Ubuntu for instance is Linux and applications, packaged together into a dedicated distribution with a custom look and connections to a few of the maintainers' online services. Despite what some think, it's possible to sell Linux software commercially, even if it's using other peoples' work. You simply have to provide your own source code if anyone asks, which they can then learn from or build on. Things get muddled though when people write 'closed source' software for it, which classically includes NVIDIA's graphics drivers (Linux creator Linus Torvalds having openly declaring it the worst company he's worked with, followed by giving it the finger and a cry of "NVIDIA, YOU!") This means that nobody can poke around and add/fix bits, and with Linux never having been a developmental priority, their quality out of the box has traditionally been poor. As of September though, the company has declared its intention to improve matters and open up more data, and it's hoped that Valve's pressure will add even more impetus to bring the quality of Linux drivers up to their far more advanced Windows/Mac versions.







● For those happy to play from their desktops, it'll be business as usual, Steam Machine or no.



● Valve has recently pledged support for Oculus Rift, giving the VR headset a boost in the eyes of PC gamers.

● Valve has always been fast on the draw, from sales to embracing free to play. That will stand it in good stead for the next generation's innovations.

» work and faith it demands of the PC game development industry on both game and technology sides, and the reliance it has on the hardware industry not just churning out cheap crap are all individually huge hurdles for any company to try and leap over in a single bound. It's not enough for even the biggest names in the industry to simply release something cool if the cool thing doesn't have the trifecta of tech, timing, and commercial weight behind it.

There are many reasons to be hopeful though, not least that Valve isn't leaping in half-cocked or assuming its name will be enough. The fact that it's even including features like game streaming demonstrates its awareness that change takes time, and every step is being carefully managed to avoid coming across as an attempt to be Microsoft 2.0 instead of an alternative. By focusing on Linux rather than trying to create a full proprietary system of its own, it builds in an escape route that developers can be comfortable with even if it does take off, and by working with partners on most of the details, continues demonstrating a desire to be as hands off as possible. So far for instance, nobody has announced a streaming-only Steam Machine, and Valve has commented that it would rather see people focus on systems that don't require that crutch. There's no reason that someone couldn't though, if the market wants it.

REASONS TO HOPE

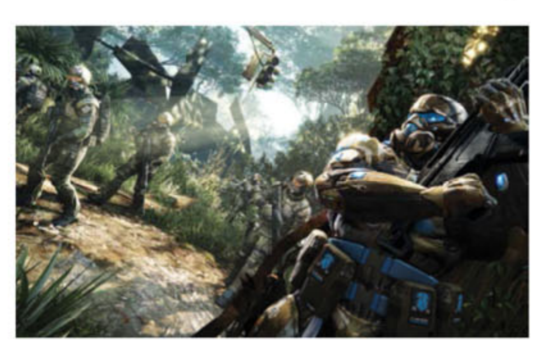


For users too, the advantages are many – especially the ones still chafing about losing their digital game collections and other data with the move to a new console. Steam doesn't scrub itself between generations, and while it going offline would of course wipe out collections, there are more ways around that on an open platform like the PC than on a locked down console. Many

have complained about the prices of the initial Steam machines announced at CES being as much or far more than a next-generation console, and not without cause.

"The price points for the initial Steam Machines are pretty high, which will limit their potential," comments Pachter. However, if successful, future machines will be able to bring prices down, and the ability to install SteamOS on any machine will offer an alternative even if officially badged models do remain a premium offering. Once over that initial pain, it's also worth noting that game prices on Steam are far, far lower than on any console, even ignoring Valve's regular sales, bundles, and willingness to explore models like free-to-play. Over the course of its life, a Steam Machine should end up being far cheaper to run than any console.

Whether the Steam Machines/SteamOS gamble works out for Valve though, it's a gamble that it needs to make, and one that only it could do – a fascinating experiment at worst, and a long hoped-for cutting of the Microsoft cord at best. The joy of the PC is that it is an open market, and as much as Valve will own a massive, hugely powerful store if its plans work, in doing so it will give the world a Linux platform that guarantees it stays open. Now more than ever before, that's something the PC needs, wherever the world decides to buy its games.



● How powerful will the Steam Machine be? You choose. If you want a £950 GeForce Titan on graphics duty, go for it.

"By focusing on Linux rather than trying to create a full proprietary system of its own, it builds in an escape route"



THE FIRST GENERATION

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM SOME OF VALVE'S HARDWARE PARTNERS LATER IN 2014

CYBERPOWERPC ▶

Not a bad set-up for the price, with a solid graphics card.

PRICE: **$499+**
SPECS: **AMD/Intel Core i5, 8GB RAM, Radeon 270/ NVIDIA GTX 760, 500GB** HD





◀ DIGITAL STORM BOLT II

An undisputed powerhouse of a Steam Machine, but at a price to match.

PRICE: **$2,584**
SPECS: **Intel Core i7 4770K, 16GB RAM, NVIDIA GTX 780 Ti, 1TB HD+120GB SSD**

ORIGINPC ▲

Expect a hefty price for this one. Will ship with Windows installed for dual-booting.

PRICE: **TBA**
SPECS: **Intel Core i7 4770K, 2x6GB GTX TITANs, others TBD**





GIGABYTE BRIX PRO ▲

Unusual choice of graphics tech, but it packs a solid punch for not much space.

PRICE: **TBA**
SPECS: **Intel Core i7-4700R, 8GB RAM, Intel Iris Pro 5200, 1TB HD**

SCAN ▶

That's laptop rather than desktop technology, likely to strain during triple-A games.

PRICE: **$1090 (£699)**
SPECS: **Intel Core i3 4000M, 8GB RAM, NVIDIA GTX 765M, 500GB HD**







Sega's Dreamcast (launched in Japan in 1998) was ruined by Sony which, without a machine to unveil, announced the PS2 (eventually launched in Japan in 2000) was on its way.

WHY CONSOLES FAIL

What do the Virtual Boy, Jaguar, Sega Saturn, Dreamcast, OnLive and PSP have in common? All are associated with failure. Now, as the Wii U flounders while next-gen consoles achieve record breaking sales, **games™** takes a look at the risky business of failed console launches to find out what lessons can be learned

In 1990, in Brentwood, Essex, hopes within the corridors of one-time computer-making king Amstrad were high. Plain Alan Sugar (as he was back then) had splashed considerable cash on manufacturing a new console that did everything it could to conjure up images of a cutting-edge machine. Its futuristic spaceship-styling, its sci-fi name – the GX4000 – and its bundled game *Burnin' Rubber* were complemented by a series of adverts which saw the console flying among the stars. After the success of the Amstrad CPC range of computers had given the team confidence and in taking the CPC architecture as its basis – building upon it with 'plus' facilities that included a 4,096-colour palette (as opposed to 32) – Sugar believed there was little chance of failure.

But he was very wrong. With 15,000 units sold, it was being discounted within months. Within a year, it was off the shelves completely. It became a footnote in gaming console history and it joined so many other machines on the scrap heap. It seems that for every PlayStation 2, Xbox 360, Wii, SNES, Mega Drive and NES is a 3DO, Virtual Boy, Atari Jaguar, Sega Saturn and OnLive.

The last year alone has seen Nintendo struggle to gain traction with its latest hardware innovation Wii U, leading many to criticise the console manufacturer's launch strategy and subsequently labelling the console a failure. But what exactly makes a console a failure and does Nintendo still have enough fight to pull back from the brink

"For every PlayStation 2, Xbox 360, Wii, SNES, Mega Drive and NES is a 3DO, Virtual Boy, Atari Jaguar, Sega Saturn and OnLive"

of commercial disaster? Even if we argue that competition is at the heart of the issue – with Nintendo struggling now against the technological superiority of both Sony and Microsoft's last two consoles – the Magnavox Odyssey, the first ever home console, makes a fascinating case study. Selling just 330,000 units over the course of its three-year lifespan, it was deemed a failure due to the amount of time and money invested into it despite any competing consoles on the market.



When the Virtual Boy failed to take off (in Japan, 1995) due to a high price point, poor marketing, uncomfortable kit and poor gaming line-up, it was discontinued within a year.

3DO Image: Evan Amos Jaguar Image: Bilby Virtual Boy Image: Rama



Burnin' Rubber on the GX4000 (launched in Europe in 1990) looked amazing and was bundled with the machine.

What the Magnavox Odyssey showed, though, was the importance of marketing. It was a console that aimed to turn people onto gaming in the home and, to that end, it should have been exciting enough for mass market adoption. It had the industry to itself, the best technology purely by default and the largest number of games (again by default). But it was poorly marketed: consumers were convinced they needed a Magnavox television to run the games.

This obfuscation is something that Nintendo can relate to – the Wii U's marketing failures left many consumers with »



Failing to distinguish itself from its CPC predecessor at a time when the world was moving to 16-bit, the 8-bit Amstrad GX4000 (launched in Europe in 1990) was a disaster.



The Magnavox Odyssey (launched in US in 1972) was the world's first console but poor marketing failed to carve a successful market for itself.

the assumption that the Wii successor was nothing more than a tablet-like peripheral for the existing Wii console. Nintendo UK's marketing executive Shelly Pearce admitted as much in trade magazine *MCV* last year, stating that "a big misconception at launch about what Wii U is," led to the machine trailing in the wake of the PS4 and Xbox One – even though it was launched a year earlier.

"Frankly I don't understand its marketing strategy, as it seems to me like Nintendo is marketing the Wii to every age group, which is probably impossible," says Tom Kalinske, who worked on the successful Mega Drive console when he was the president and CEO of Sega of America from 1990 to 1996. But then Nintendo hasn't always been on the ball in this area. Nintendo's Virtual Boy had a similarly unique concept as the Wii U and also needed some careful explaining. Launched in 1995, it was, however, let down by marketing and price. It sold just 770,000 units and was discontinued within a year.

Not that this is an issue exclusively for Nintendo. One-time rival Sega did incredibly well with the Mega Drive but far less so with the Sega Saturn. "It wasn't different enough from the Mega Drive in terms of the quality of games," admits Kalinske. "The price was too high, we only had a few games at launch, none of them were a hit and it didn't provide for a basis for a differentiated marketing strategy." Sega was also outgunned when it came to the Dreamcast. Sony gained the upper hand from the start, as developer Robert Troughton, who created games for both companies' machines, explains: "Sony was very cunning with its marketing. When the Dreamcast was announced as the first hardware that could truly compete with the PlayStation, Sony announced the PS2, claiming it to be the most amazing technology ever. It was slightly exaggerated, as I remember, but the marketing worked for Sony. Even though the hardware wouldn't be released in time to compete at retail with Dreamcast, Sony succeeded by convincing most gamers to wait for PS2."



Sensible Jon Hare rates the 3DS a failure.



Tom Kalinske oversaw the release of the Mega Drive and Saturn.



"The Wii U's marketing failures left many consumers with the assumption that the Wii successor was a tablet-like peripheral"

And that brings us to the second reason for failure: timing. The Odyssey, in being the first ever home console, was a victim of dipping a toe in untested water and realising that heavy marketing would be needed to ensure that people who never thought they needed the machine, saw it as an essential buy. Magnavox had followed this up with a series of consoles, each trying to outdo the previous one in terms of technology but none of them had the same impact as the Atari 2600 which came in the second generation of home console manufacturing.

Launched a year later than the Fairchild Channel F with its world's first feature of artificial intelligence, the 2600 was, at $200, more expensive but it had better visuals and sound. It also came out at just the right time. By now the gaming momentum had been building and it was established as a cool pastime. Atari had made a name for itself in the arcades, notably with *Pong*, so its credentials were well established. "The only real competition we had was the Fairchild Channel F so when we introduced our machine the market was hungry for new stuff," says Atari co-founder Allan Alcorn. "It's easier to be the smartest guy in the room when you are the only guy in the room."



Despite technical superiority, the lack of games and the expense of the machine against a handheld bundled with *Tetris* left the Atari Lynx (US, 1989) well behind.

Creating for a failed machine



Producing a game on a console that looks to be failing is not always a disaster for developers. Unless the console has barely picked up any sales – and we're referring to the GX4000 and its miserly 15,000 units here – then there will be a decent number of people looking to justify their purchase. Chances are there will be very few games around for the system so any that are released will tend to be snapped up.

That was the experience of Robert Troughton, founder of Pitbull Syndicate, whose company had produced a special version of a PC and PlayStation success for the Dreamcast. *Demolition Racer: No Exit* was released in October 2000, a year after Sega's console had launched. Although the Dreamcast would be discontinued just five months later, it was worth the gamble.

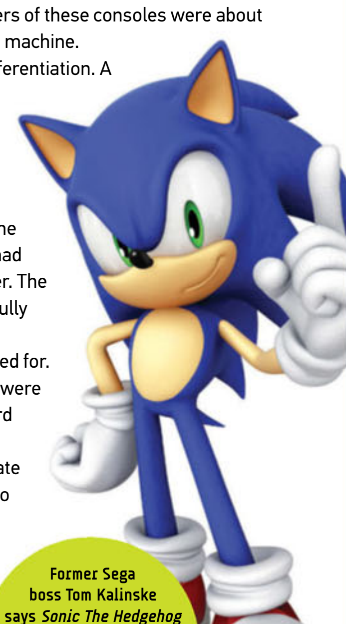
"That game actually did pretty well on the failing console due to the lack of serious competition at the time," Troughton says. Troughton, however, has tended to ensure his company's games work cross platforms. "We've always made sure that, when using our own engine or using licensed technology, everything works on multiple platforms."

After the incredible Nintendo-baiting success of the Mega Drive, the Sega Saturn, while loved, was a commercial flop. Sega could ill-afford another hardware failure.

Being first can often backfire, though. As we saw, the Sega Dreamcast was launched in 1998 and kickstarted the sixth generation of consoles but, the PlayStation was a dominant platform, having broken the stranglehold that Sega and Nintendo had long held over the industry (both having produced consoles that were left wanting) and so it could use that great reputation to good effect. The Dreamcast's market share, while initially successful (and it sold some ten million units worldwide) declined to such an extent that Sega pulled out of making consoles. But it's also about being relevant. Amstrad's GX4000 console came out in September 1990, two years after the 16-bit Mega Drive had begun to enthral gamers. Commodore tried a similar trick with its C64GS console based on the Commodore 64 and also failed. Both machines were hoping to take on the NES and Sega Master System at a time when users of these consoles were about to advance to a fourth-gen machine.

So to the third point: differentiation. A console has to be different in a positive way to other consoles. The family friendly Nintendo Wii's novel Wiimote catered for a new market and overcame the reluctance that some had to use a standard controller. The PlayStation looked beautifully mature and offered the 3D graphics that gamers longed for. The SNES and Mega Drive were technological leaps forward from the NES and Master System. Fans could graduate knowing they were going to get something better.

The consoles that sell best are either those that offer something stunningly new, like the stylus-controlled »



Former Sega boss Tom Kalinske says *Sonic The Hedgehog* and other strong games helped make the Sega Mega Drive (launched in Japan in 1988) a success.

> "The Dreamcast's market share, while initially successful, declined to such an extent that Sega pulled out of making consoles"

Needle in a haystack

To understand what it takes to make a successful console, you need only talk to Dave Needle. Along with R. J. Mical, he co-invented the Atari Lynx and the 3DO Interactive Multiplayer, and both ultimately failed. It was unfortunate. In terms of home computing, Needle had great success. He helped to invent the Amiga home computer and he worked on the development of its custom chips. His efforts paved the way for another console, the Amiga CD32 which was reasonably successful and sold well yet was dented by a lack of original games and an inability to handle the growing trend for first person shooters.

There was nothing inherently wrong with the hardware of the Lynx and 3DO. The Atari Lynx was the most advanced handheld console ever made at the time. It was large and bulky but it had 4,096 colours, great sound and a solid graphics engine. The 3DO's concept was sound but it cost too much and it suffered from a lack of exclusive content.

Looking back, Needle can see the attributes needed for success. "Commercial success is largely dependent on the 'commercial' aspects of the product," he says. "It has to be priced right. It has to be positioned right in the stores and in the ads. It has to have something about it that is compelling to both the buyer and the user in the case of parent and child. The compelling reason is almost always the delivered pleasures. In the case of consoles, it's the appearance and feel and satisfaction of the games. It's never the hardware. Never."

He believes the hardware platform is just that: a platform on which to develop, tweak, improve, test, deliver, and finally, play the games. "Hardware developers often lose sight of that," he says. "I still deal with that at my ripe old age of 66. At my current job, even some of the software guys find their base software to be the attractive element, not the user-visible results. It's a shame. They could be great."

Needle believes five attributes are vital: marketing, deals with third-party developers for great games, support for those developers, commercials and deals with stores for placement, inventory and shared advertising. "Product placement on TV shows that the customers watch works well," Needle says. But the next stage is the biggie: "It's the follow through. The product must be on the shelves in time for the first seasonal buy. The first games must be compelling. The 3DO launched with *PuttPutt Goes To The Dumps* or something silly like that. Game Boy launched with *Tetris*. Lynx had good launch games, but Atari made very bad deals with the stores, some would not even carry Lynx. And the commercials were crap."

DS or the Wii, or consoles that promise to enhance what you already have, like PS4 or Xbox One. Communicating this is key: the 3DO Interactive Multiplayer was the first entrant in the 32-bit fifth generation console war and promised much but it cost $700 when it came out and, crucially, it couldn't quite get people to understand what it was all about. Its games were more adult in nature – cue lots of FMV titles too – and while that was different, it didn't fit in with a market that was still aimed at children. Timing, price and marketing failed the 3DO to a degree but it also didn't have enough to make people want to progress to it.

"I remember just hearing about the costs of the console and it always seemed like a moving target," says Graeme Devine who had planned to port his game *The 11th Hour* to 3DO. He said the numerous manufacturers licensed to produce 3DO consoles (the idea was to have lots of 3DO-compatible machines in the same way that lots of different companies made VHS players) was also its downfall, much like Microsoft's own MSX, which Devine cites. "Did you go for the Panasonic one with more RAM or the American 3DO system? It all smacked of Microsoft MSX all over again," he says. "It was never clear cut."

But concentrating on great titles is also worth doing and those that don't very quickly fall by the wayside. Step forward the Atari Jaguar. While the Atari 2600 had, in Atari co-founder Nolan Bushnell's own words, "a lot of software that was good enough at the time to drive sales," the Atari Jaguar did not. And, when up against existing machines such as the Mega Drive and the SNES with mammoth catalogues and competing against Sony's debut console, it flailed around and died. "The support for third party software [on the Atari Jaguar] was lousy with bad documentation and poor communications," says Bushnell. "People buy software not hardware. They did not have a killer, must-have software title that would drive sales but the 2600 did. It didn't help that the main chip had some technical flaws that could have been corrected if they would have been willing to do another fab turn but it was games ultimately that ruined the Jaguar."

"You need to provide not only an enticing software line-up of exclusive games, but also compete on price and hardware features"



A poor launch line-up ruined the chances of the Jaguar (launched in US in 1993) to make an impact and it failed to build on its history.


Before joining id Software Graeme Devine planned to port his games to the 3DO.

The importance of a strong set of games cannot be overstated. "You need to provide not only an enticing software line-up of exclusive games, but also compete on price and hardware features," says Ben Ward, founder of games company Supergonk. "In the past it was fairly easy to pick a clear winner and loser in a console generation: who had the best games for the best price?"

And it was a poor line-up of games was the final nail in the coffin of the GX4000. Bundled game *Burnin' Rubber* aside, it was a mix of the mediocre and CPC ports and it didn't stand a chance even though it had tried a third-party partnership with the largest software house in Europe at the time, Ocean. The same fate



The Nintendo Wii (Japan, 2008) was hugely successful and that is because it distinguished itself from the competition and filled a hole others failed to spot.

A call for compatibility

If stalwart developer, Jon Hare, had his way, we wouldn't be discussing the success or otherwise of various consoles. Hare has always played a cautious game. While he has worked on a number of titles that have not seen the light of day, he has always deliberately avoided cutting edge and unproven machines and has always worked on more established ones.

"I remember back to things like 3DO, Konix, CD32 and Jaguar," says *Sensible Soccer* creator Jon Hare. "Then there was Dreamcast, 3DS, Vita and so on: all of them to a certain extent failures compared to the aspirations of their manufacturers."

In his ideal world, there wouldn't have been anywhere near as many as there have been which would, he says, have benefitted those who backed the wrong horse, either from a consumer or developer perspective.

befell the Virtual Boy, 3DO, Sega Saturn, Philips CD-i, the Amiga CD32, and Gizmondo, all of which had poor launch line-ups.

A strong game can, therefore, make a console. Consider the battle between the advanced, 16-bit colour Atari Lynx and the green-screen 8-bit Game Boy. Despite being at a technological disadvantage, the Game Boy had the delightfully addictive *Tetris*, so it came out ahead. Consider the PlayStation. It needed to make an impact because it was the young upstart in the industry, so it debuted with *Ridge Racer* and *WipEout*, the latter proving to be cool enough to land it a spot in nightclubs and redefine preconceptions of gaming culture. *Ridge Racer* was a well-known arcade IP at the time and a perfect showcase for the new system's capabilities as the first console to be able to do texture-mapped 3D decently.

Atari could have easily taken this kind of step, given its back catalogue, but it didn't. "Atari could and should have used the IP they already owned to do something similar for the Jaguar, but no, we got *Cybermorph* and bloody *Trevor McFur*," says Jeff Minter, *Tempest 2000* creator.

"What Atari did have but failed to use well was a lot of IP that people might have remembered from the old days of Atari and which might have been well used to get people to pay some attention to the Jaguar," Minter adds. "They had the rights to all kinds of cool stuff like *Asteroids*, *Battle Zone*, *Defender*, *Centipede*, *Star Raiders*, all those old arcade games that many people would have remembered fondly. They should have had '2000' versions of those made by people who dearly loved the original games, just as I did with *Tempest 2000*. By the time they did try to use some of it, it was too late."

A decent set of games on one system combined with a lack of confidence surrounding another can be devastating for the latter and so the Jaguar failed. So too did the 3DO. "The development environment of the 3DO was fantastic and the API was well supported but the top end lacked clear vision and any kind of killer app," says Devine. "Virgin was very bullish about the 3DO hardware and we had *The 11th Hour* running on the machine but then Virgin pulled the plug. The Nintendo 64 had *Mario 3D* and it was game over."

> *"What Atari did have but failed to use well was a lot of IP that people might have remembered from the old days"*

The idea behind 3DO (launched in US in 1993) was to licence the technology to various manufacturers but it proved too confusing. The initial $700 tag was prohibitive.



Michael Pachter sees a dim future for Wii U.



Nolan Bushnell puts the failure of the Jaguar down to poor games.

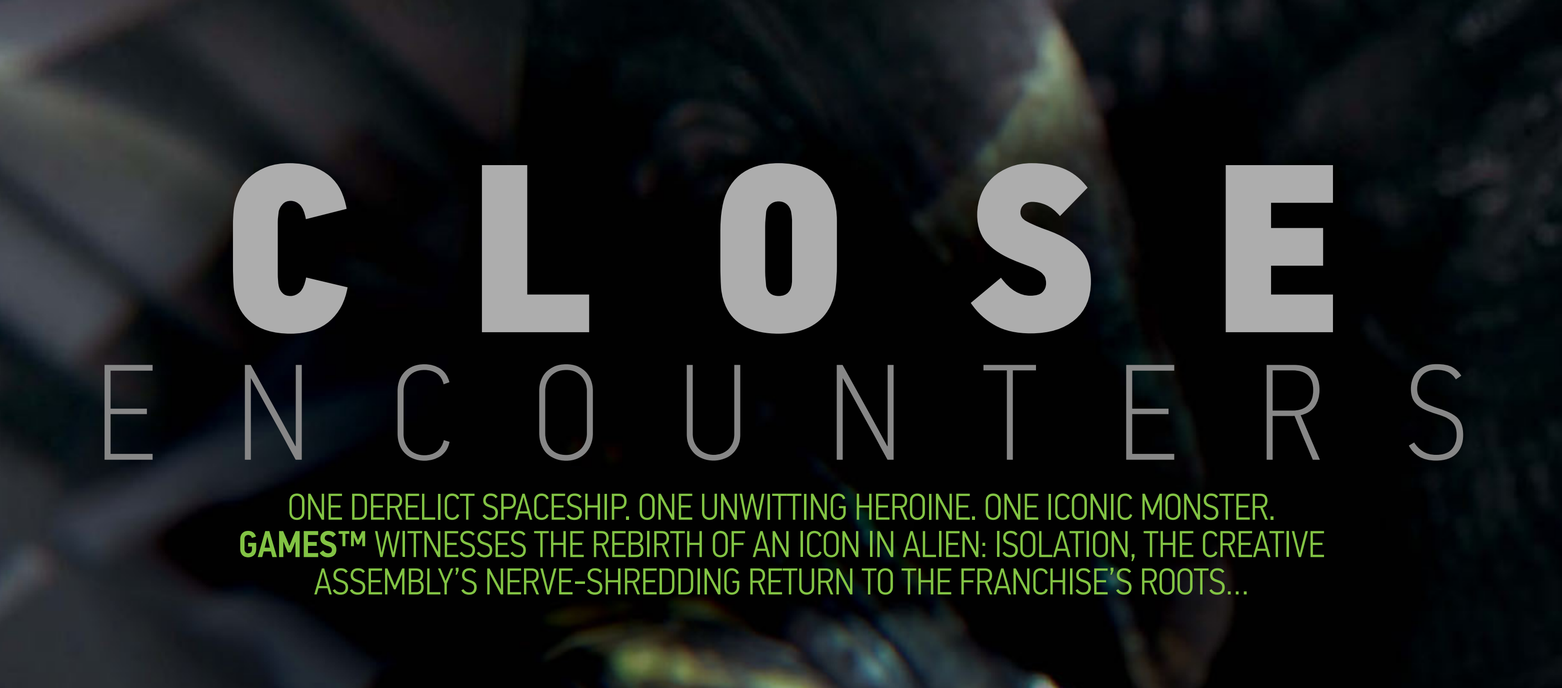


The Android-based micro-console Ouya (worldwide, 2012) was a massive Kickstarter success but it takes more than new hardware to be a long-lasting option.

Nintendo is a company that has always been a company soaring at the forefront of innovation but the Wii U failed to represent at launch a significant leap in design from its predecessor. The mass market was confused and the dedicated gamers are still waiting for the killer app that has failed to materialise. And it's clear that even relying fully on the strength of first-party software can be perilous in today's marketplace. *Super Mario 3D World* sold below expectations, debuting in the UK charts outside of the top ten and below *Knack*, which received a lukewarm critical reception in comparison. In Japan, *Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII* outsold *Super Mario 3D World* on launch by three times as many units.

Clearly what Nintendo lacks today is third-party support – gamers want exclusives but they also want a game popular on one system to be available on their machine. With most publishers having already abandoned the platform within a year, it's not looking positive for a console that has sold significantly below Nintendo's internal projections (the company expected the Wii U to sell five million units by March 2013. By September it had sold less than four). Does that mean the writing is on the wall for Nintendo's Wii U? "Its future is pretty dim," says videogame analyst Michael Pachter from Wedbush Morgan. "The hardware has not captured consumer imagination, and the technology doesn't feel new enough to win people over versus the PS4 and the Xbox One. The Wii U's price advantage is not significant enough to win over customers compared to the PS4 and the other companies are advertising more heavily."

Nintendo has fallen prey to many of the same mistakes of its predecessors, and with apathy towards the console never more evident after the launch of PlayStation 4 and Xbox One, it wouldn't be unfair to classify the Wii U as the latest in a long line of failed console hardware. Nintendo believed that it had little chance of failure in the run up to launch and it was very wrong. Nintendo now must decide whether the Wii U will be consigned to just another footnote in gaming history, or a serious lesson to be learned going into the future. Because, as we've learnt time and time again, success isn't something given but something earned.



CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

ONE DERELICT SPACESHIP. ONE UNWITTING HEROINE. ONE ICONIC MONSTER. **GAMES™** WITNESSES THE REBIRTH OF AN ICON IN ALIEN: ISOLATION, THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY'S NERVE-SHREDDING RETURN TO THE FRANCHISE'S ROOTS...



"Imagine what it'd be like if I released Ridley Scott's Alien in the studio right now," Creative Assembly's Ali Hope poses to games™ with a nervous excitement to suggest that he might well just do that. "Well, what would you do? No, *really* what would you do? We asked people in the studio before we had anything on screen, when we were discussing the game we were trying to make, and people were saying 'Well, I'd try to get under the desk or make sure it couldn't see me.' Well, cool, but then what would you do?" While it sounds like Hope is trying to discern **games™**'s survival tactics, he is, in fact, musing on what is perhaps the toughest question the studio has had to answer during the production of *Alien: Isolation* – the studio's survival horror take on Ridley Scott's original creation. How do you »

Creative Assembly is keen to emphasise the hazards of the environment as well as the Alien itself. The space station Sevastopol will be populated by several dangers.

"IT'S A THING THAT DOMINATES THE SPACE. JUST PHYSICALLY, IT'S HUGE. WE'VE GOT A NINE-FOOT ALIEN THAT IS POSSIBLY THE BIGGEST IN VIDEOGAMES"

make the Alien scary again? After all, this is a franchise that has been run through the wringer on more than one occasion, suffering an unremitting ignominy at the hands of misguided creative minds over the decades.

"Everyone has this perception of what Ridley Scott's Alien really is and that's quite different from what came later," Hope continues. "It's a thing that dominates the space. Just physically it's huge. We've got a nine-foot Alien that is possibly the biggest in videogames. We wanted something that looked down on the player, was intimidating and demanded respect. Not something that could be easily mowed down or was running around."

That meant going back to the original design document for the Xenomorph, a graceful and hugely imposing entity, seemingly a composite of leather, bone and industrial tubing – Creative Assembly has even gone so far as to reinstate the original translucent surface to the creature's elongated, cylindrical head, complete with barely-visible skull beneath. And while the studio has tried effortlessly to evoke the agility and predatory instincts that made the original creation such a horrific presence, fans of the original 1979 film will also remember that it was, underneath it all, just a very tall man in a very uncomfortable suit.

Liberties, therefore, needed to be taken. "Like a lot of the game the first thing we did was a phase of deconstruction, taking everything apart. That was no less the case for the Alien," explains Hope. "I think people's perception of that creature is a bit of a mishmash – a bit from *Alien* and a bit from *Aliens* where you see them a little more. Our first step was to create a completely authentic, 1-for-1 direct version of the original Alien. Of course, that is a rubber suit made for a man. That's fine for the film where you don't see him full frame that often, but a game is very emergent so we're going to see him a whole number of infinite ways. We needed something that would match peoples' perception. So our Alien

The studio hasn't revealed too much about the crew accompanying Amanda Ripley on her mission. Chances are at least one of them is a conniving android.



has been adapted for the game, so we've made some small changes to enable it to manoeuvre around quickly and believably so it doesn't look like just a bloke in a rubber suit." But what's important is not so much what it looks like when it's on the screen, but the fear that it instils in the player when it's not.

We're wandering through the derelict Sevastopol – the eerie space station where Amanda Ripley (Ellen's daughter) is sent to recover the Nostromo's black box – and it shares a few design choices with Alien's central ship. This is the Seventies vision of a lived-in future, one where dirt glazes its imperial white sofas and slick operating systems have been replaced by fuzzy CRT monitors relaying messages from Earth in lines of basic green text. There's also one of those drinking bird things.

But it also has a tangible sense of function, its walls spewing vast tubes of wire that trail through its corridors and into its various stations. Perfect hiding places, it would seem, for an extra-terrestrial. As wires dangle limply and chubby coils spring from ceiling vents, the discomforting visual similarities between the Alien and its environment fortify a permeating sense of dread that creates a stranglehold on the player. You get the feeling that it really could be *anywhere*.

The minutiae of aesthetic design plays a key role in this, not only in evoking details of the original film but also in constructing areas to navigate. Cabinets to crouch behind, creaking lockers to hide in and even a few tables for Creative Assembly employees to cower beneath. Our demonstration proves to be one of *Isolation*'s smaller areas (somewhere at the halfway point) but its effectiveness is undeniable. The tension has been so expertly conveyed to the player through setting alone that when the Alien eventually emerges from a ceiling vent – slowly stretching its limbs before surveying the environment – the immediate panicky instinct to retreat is overwhelming.

"One of the things we found out early on was that people were scared when they could see the Alien because it meant that they were in immediate danger," explains Hope. "But then we found

A NEW RIPLEY

THE STORY OF ALIEN: ISOLATION

SET 15 YEARS after the events of Ridley Scott's *Alien*, the story is told from the perspective of Amanda Ripley – Ellen Ripley's daughter (mentioned briefly in James Cameron's *Aliens: Director's Cut*) – who volunteers for a mission to recover the flight recorder jettisoned from the lost spacecraft, Nostromo. Interestingly, when asked whether the title will be regarded as canon, creative lead Ali Hope states that the studio didn't approach it with that in mind. "It's our reimagining," he says. "We're inspired by the first film and whatever happened next doesn't really matter in a way. When we started out, I really wanted to make a story that was closely tied to that first film, so we could take advantage of [the fiction]. Fans decide this stuff in a way. We don't really talk about it in terms of canon."





The Xenomorph itself is a mix of the design featured in the original *Alien*, as well as adopting some of the more agile traits associated with its incarnation in *Aliens*. It's one scary star-beast.

that people's feedback was that they were really scared when they couldn't see the Alien – when you don't know where it is and have no idea where it's going to appear from next. That was fascinating. When it does navigate through the world you can quite often hear it but you don't know where it'll appear."

The game is divided into a series of these exhilarating encounters. For us, our experience involved completing a series of objectives, while silently circumnavigating the creature's gaze. Your motion tracker is your most obvious ally and there's also a flashlight (the use of which can easily alert the Alien) but fundamental to survival is the use of the peek function – a quick glance around cover offers a slight advantage over the interstellar intruder. "It's an information war," Hope delightfully exclaims. "He doesn't know where you are or you don't know where he is. I think that's why the peek function really important. It means you can take a risk and see if you can get the upper hand, looking at which way he's moving. The motion tracker tells you so much but it doesn't tell you everything."

It's not a fool-proof strategy, as we found out. Peering out of cover for too long can alert the beast, which unleashes a blood-curdling roar before racing towards your person. Running away is futile, as is trying to attack. "One of the things we were trying to do was make sure there was some sort of cost or risk associated with every action the player has," says Hope. "The motion tracker, when you bring it up, blurs the background – you can change focus, though. And likewise, unlike some stealth games when you raise your head up or around, you *are* exposing yourself. It's making these A/B choices: do I stay here or do I go? I can't stay here forever! Watching people play is absolutely fascinating."

And while **games™** survives the encounter (barely), the sense of triumph is soon undercut by Hope's revelation that our run-in with the Xenomorph was a diluted example of the final stage. "We're being really unfair dropping you into that space without prior knowledge. In that section, we actually restricted some of the paths available to the Alien because it would've been possibly too easy for it to move around," he reveals. "So we left it so the Alien could walk around the same space you walk around and crawl into the ceiling. If the Alien can't find you it usually looks for a ceiling vent and disappears and appears somewhere else. It can use wall and floor vents to navigate the world – as the player can. Today we tried to give you a very narrow slice of gameplay to reduce the number of things the player has to worry about."

More impressive, the studio insists that the Alien has its own thoughts and processes that adapt to the player's movements on-the-fly – it won't be fooled by repeated strategies. Camouflaging into the scenery, it prowls around with a noticeable intelligence, investigating obvious escape routes and hiding places. After the iconic creation has been reduced to something of a kamikaze pilot over the years, blindly hurtling towards the end of a gun barrel in »





The studio has gone to great lengths to recreate the worn-in detail of the original film.



The motion tracker is your best friend and you can change your point of focus while holding it.

» waves, there's something distinctly more unnerving about this calculated interpretation.

"I think it would've been easier for us to take the more obvious route of making an Alien that would be running under scripts or paths, but early on every time we played it and every time we tested it with people the reaction was so strong," says Hope. "The sense that the Alien could be there at any moment was what we were going for, so it was challenging but that was the price. It was worth pursuing."

It's clearly an edgy concept: adopting one of the biggest cinematic franchises that has long turned its back on subtlety. The obvious comparison to make is Frictional Games' *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (which Hope describes as "a wonderful game, terrifying and absolutely fantastic") but the nature of survival horror in today's medium has lead to inspiration springing from unusual sources.

"You kind of get glimpses of it in unexpected places," he says. "There are moments in *Skyrim* and *Fallout* that have little snapshots of horror where you feel completely scared and underprepared for what's about to occur. I suppose what I'm saying is that survival horror isn't just *Silent Hill* with a bit of wood and a nail, and that's the only definition of the genre. Something like *Thief: Deadly Shadows* is a big inspiration. I remember playing that and just the guard's footsteps got your heart racing because you're not equipped to deal with it.

"In a way, *Minecraft* has been the most successful survival horror game of this generation," he continues. "That first night in *Minecraft*, if you come to it completely cold, that first night is terrifying. You're so overpowered by these terrifying creatures and you may have built this tiny shelter but you've got these things banging at your door. I think what I'm really telling you is *my* inept first experience in *Minecraft*. But I built this tiny thing without any torches, so I'm cowering in the corner in the dark terrified while the monsters are trying to storm through the door."



Much of the demo is spent just surveying the environment, which proves as unnerving as the Alien encounter itself.

"TAKING A CERTAIN COURSE OF ACTION MAY CAUSE THE ALIEN TO APPEAR, SO YOU HAVE TO WEIGH UP YOUR CHOICES"

We constantly hear of developers trying to dig down right into the roots of survival horror. Each has spoken of stripping back all the histrionics that have mutated the genre over the years, but *Alien: Isolation* may just be the most high-profile example of this to date. It doesn't come as much of a surprise when we do eventually discover an attack button – a jab at the left shoulder trigger forces Ripley to slash violently with a wrench – but Creative Assembly informs us that combat is kept to a minimum.

It's one person up against a seemingly unstoppable force, pathetically unequipped to deal with the circumstances. "We love that first film and it felt no one had delivered that experience," says Hope, "and so that was what we were trying to do. We talk about 're-aliening the Alien'; to try, like I said earlier, to make it this thing that is held up as something that players respect and not just at the end of your pulse rifle." But it's hard to imagine *Isolation* maintaining the level of fear and involvement found in our brief demonstration over the course of a whole campaign. Assurances have been made that the game is more than just dodging the titular monster's maw(s), harking back to the original film's '*Jaws* in space' sales pitch.

"The Alien is the star of the show but the focus for us is on the whole experience," explains Hope. "It's very much about the player's journey, how they navigate through that world – it's a very dangerous world. There are a number of



A hacking minigame involves matching a series of patterns with a computer console.

ALIEN AUTOPSY GAMES™ RATES VIDEOGAMES' GREATEST ALIEN ADVERSARIES

NAME: Alien (alias: Xenomorph)
FIRST SPOTTED: 1979 (Alien)



TRAITS: Over nine feet tall and capable of running and crawling across ceilings and walls, this predatory creature also secretes extremely potent acid that can corrode almost any substance it comes into contact with. A highly aggressive specimen.

CONCLUSION: An incredibly agile and deadly killing machine.
FEAR FACTOR: High.

NAME: Space Invader
FIRST SPOTTED: 1978 (Space Invaders)



TRAITS: Moves in rigid horizontal patterns before descending towards the ground. It has the capacity to unleash powerful artillery strikes but evidence suggests that its military prowess is derisory at best.

CONCLUSION: Individually weak but can prove troublesome in numbers.
FEAR FACTOR: High.

NAME: The Covenant
FIRST SPOTTED: 2001 (Halo)

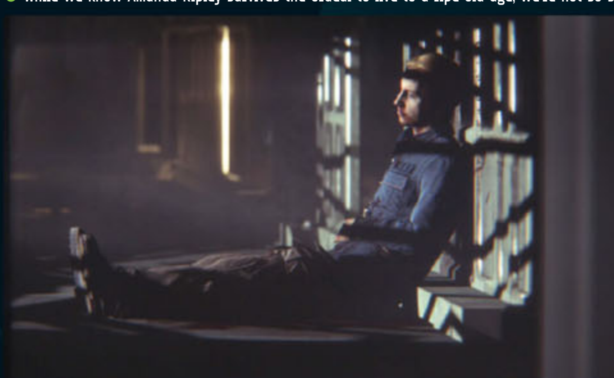


TRAITS: An intelligent, fearsome alliance of races with a colossal military strength. Unwavering religious beliefs have set The Covenant on a path of war with humanity. Although, one man has proven to be enough to vanquish hundreds of their kind.

CONCLUSION: Fight fire with fire to take this ferocious enemy down.
FEAR FACTOR: Moderate.



While we know Amanda Ripley survives the ordeal to live to a ripe old age, we're not so sure about her comrades.





obstacles, and the Alien is the apex of that – the main threat, always something on the player's mind. The station itself is a dangerous place, physically dangerous, and something the player has to figure out how to navigate through. That's quite an engaging problem."

We're given a couple of examples, one being a pattern-matching hacking puzzle presented wonderfully in analogue fashion, but it's more intriguing to hear how you'll interact with other survivors. "There's also a small population of inhabitants on the station and they're in the same position as you are and they react to events in various ways – sometimes positively and sometimes negatively," reveals Hope. "We actually found that there's a really nice combination of things to keep the player occupied."

We ask whether it's a case of the human population being as much to be feared as the Alien itself? "It's more of a case of everything being really risky and how you want to progress has certain risks," replies Hope. "Taking a certain course of action may cause the Alien to appear, so you have to weigh up your choices. Today we're not talking about the wider game, instead showing you what it's like being in a confined space

The lighting has a huge impact on evoking the mood of the original film and amplifying the tense situation.



We heard noticeable plucks of Jerry Goldsmith's original score as we explored the environment. It's still surprisingly effective.

with an Alien and a motion tracker. Certainly, at first, I felt we had to get that right and then pour everything else on top of that. But it's weighing up the risks constantly. What have I got at my disposal? What's the situation I'm in? Is it changing? It's a constant checklist of benefits and risks."

And if it sounds like the studio is confident about the risks it's taking – akin to more of an indie studio's risk-taking than a major studio – then that's because it is. Even now, after spending three years in development, Hope delights in the game's capacity to surprise and catch him off-guard. "In a way, we're the experts," he states. "We're the masters and we created this game from nothing. We know everything that's going on behind the scenes. We generated the spaces ourselves. We've authored everything you've seen on the screen. But we get caught out. We die. We jump. And we play the game everyday. It's a very difficult game to demo because I die a lot.

"It's part of the experience in a way that I still get caught out," he concludes. "I've played it possibly more than most people on the team but, honestly, it feels like I should be playing it with a heart rate monitor."



NAME: Giygas
FIRST SPOTTED: 1989 (EarthBound)



TRAITS: With aspirations to trap all humanity in infinite darkness, Giygas psychologically tortures its opponents before unleashing a barrage of telekinetic attacks. However, as the power of love sends it reeling, it's possible for Huey Lewis to save the world.

CONCLUSION: A horrific barrage of imagery and apocalyptic powers.
FEAR FACTOR: High.

NAME: The Reapers
FIRST SPOTTED: 2007 (Mass Effect)



TRAITS: A highly-advanced race of machines that return every 50,000 to harvest all intelligent life in the galaxy. Their extremely powerful weaponry is matched by their ability to assimilate other races. They are designed for one thing: exterminating life.

CONCLUSION: Horrific and devastating, chance of survival is slim.
FEAR FACTOR: Very high.

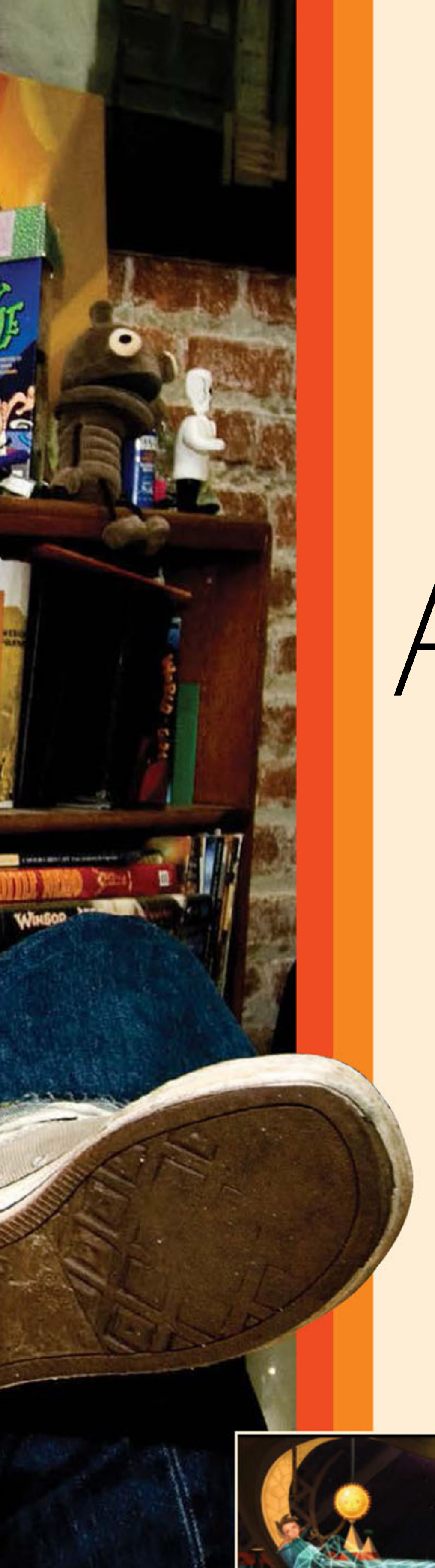
NAME: Elvis
FIRST SPOTTED: 2000 (Perfect Dark)



TRAITS: Obsessed with Earth's inhabitants and culture, Elvis is a skilled marksman and serves as a bodyguard to the Maian ambassador. No malicious inclination towards humanity, his greatest offence is his jocundity in the face of cold mortality.

CONCLUSION: Mostly harmless, watch out for his terrible jokes.
FEAR FACTOR: Low.


Dumbland

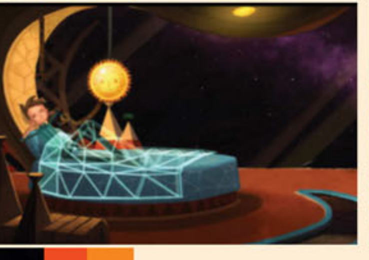


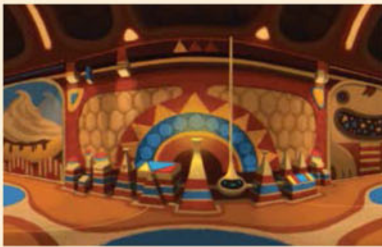
A DOUBLE FINE ADVENTURE

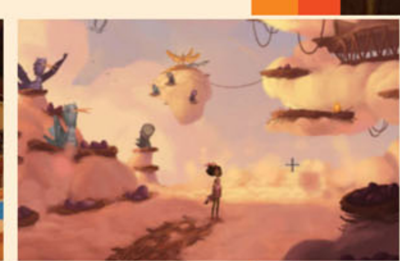
STILL INDEPENDENT AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, TIM SCHAFER'S DOUBLE FINE PRODUCTIONS IS TAKING "INDIE" TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Near the end of his decade at LucasArts, Tim Schafer had a rude awakening. "I was asking someone what they were working on and they were like, 'I think I might try to get on that *Full Throttle* sequel.' That was literally how I found out," he recalls of the proposed follow-up to his 1995 adventure game. "I had this weird gut feeling, because I felt that my creative ownership over [*Full Throttle*] was total, it was something that lived in my head and it was very personal. But then I realised, no, it's not. It's George Lucas's, he paid me for that and he owns it, and people can do whatever they want with it. And that's when I was like, 'Oh god, if I'm ever going to control this stuff I have to start my own company'."

Thirteen years later, Schafer's Double Fine Productions has shipped more than a dozen games, each different from the last and all but one owned by the studio. Double Fine has made big games and small, publisher-backed and self-funded. It's taken to Kickstarter twice, raking in a combined $4.5m, and it's received Indie Fund's two largest investments to date. But although the 60+ person company has always been independent, Double Fine hasn't always seemed like an indie developer. "We're in a weird position where for years it was frustrating for me because we were independent but we didn't fit in," Schafer says. "We didn't get invited to the indie parties, we weren't really seen as part of the »







indie community, because of our relationships with publishers and because we were making games [like *Psychonauts* and *Brütal Legend*] that didn't seem like indie titles – even though we were totally independent."

The tide started to turn after EA cancelled a *Brütal Legend* sequel. With no other work queued up, Double Fine made a radical change to focus on smaller projects conceived during periodic prototyping blitzes dubbed "Amnesia Fortnight" – a move Schafer credits with saving the company. It's thrived under the new system, rapidly producing small games in a variety of genres and forgoing traditional publisher relationships in favour of outside-the-box funding opportunities.

Its highest profile funding experiment came in February 2012 when Schafer launched the *Double Fine Adventure* on Kickstarter, asking for $300k to make a traditional adventure game and $100k for a behind-the-scenes documentary. "Either the game will be great, or it will be a spectacular failure caught on camera for everyone to see. Either way, you win," he said in the pitch video, oblivious that this Kickstarter would become the game industry's first massive crowd funding success.

"I ALWAYS MAKE THESE GAMES WITH THE THOUGHT THAT THIS IS GOING TO BE MY LAST"

Double Fine Adventure met its goal in a scant eight hours and broke a million dollars overnight; by the end of the 33-day campaign, backers had given more than 800% over the asking price. Double Fine is using the money to make *Broken Age*, a LucasArts-style adventure partially available now as an early access beta and planned for formal release this summer on PC, Mac, Linux, and mobile.

Speaking to **games™** during the campaign, Schafer praised crowd funding for cutting out naysaying publishers so he could offer a niche game directly to the consumers who wanted it. Deep in *Broken Age*'s production, he remains enthusiastic. "Going into it was really interesting," he says of developing a game funded by fan goodwill. "You're definitely still accountable because everyone's watching you, but at least it's those people you cared about anyway. It's less frustrating [than working with a publisher] because you're dealing with somebody who's actually the end-user, the player, as opposed to a middle person who's making a decision based on risk and mitigation. At least



"I think a lot of people do see it as a preorder with a lot of chance for getting ripped off," Schafer says of Kickstarter.









In November, Double Fine celebrated indies by throwing a party for 1,850 of their closest friends. "When we go to a show like PAX, or a fan meet-up or a backer event, there's always this indescribable super happy vibe, because the backers are really into the project, and they're really happy to meet you, and you're really happy to meet them. It's just this huge love fest. It's so great," Schafer explains of the inspiration for Day of the Devs, the free, public event that took place in San Francisco. *Spacebase DF-9*, *Broken Age*, and a dozen other games from indie studios like Supergiant, Capy, and Gaijin Games were on display, and *Fez* creator Phil Fish even showed up to DJ. "Combined, it was something worth seeing. It was great to be in a position where we could be organised enough to pull off a show like that," Schafer says. "I would love to do it again. I'd love to do it every year."





"Any time you can show your game to a lot of people all at once, there's a benefit; we tried to make it really fun."



"We were always trying to make games [at LucasArts] about things that weren't being done in games."

you're dealing with people who know what they want." As a result, developing his first adventure game since 1998's *Grim Fandango* has been "kind of like a dream. We had the money in advance, which you never do, and we had a bunch of people who we already knew liked what we were making. We just had to worry about making the game good."

That's not to say all has gone smoothly. Bumps in the road have been broadcast for the world to see – or, at least, the 87,000 backers whose pledges scored them early access to the documentary. "We do try to show everything. There are some awkward meetings where we talk about how we have more game than we have budget for, and what we're going to do about it. Because I really did want to show everything," Schafer says.

What's this about budget problems? "As soon as the project was overfunded, I had to change the way I was thinking about the game. Some people would have said we should have stayed with a $300k game and made that, but that would have meant pocketing $3m, which I think people also would have had ethical problems with," Schafer laughs. "So we put all the money into the game, and I was designing that game, and now I was thinking about it as a real adventure game, something that would live up to *Grim Fandango* or *Full Throttle*. And I wasn't the only one who had that change. I think all of our backers were seeing a real adventure game now, coming out of this, and their expectations were high."

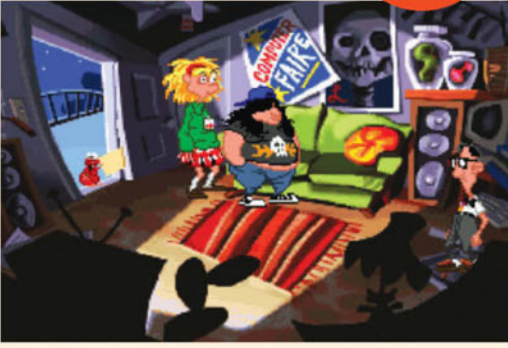
As he finished the design, Schafer realised the Kickstarter funds would only cover half of what he had planned. "So then I had to decide, is it going to end earlier? It's about a boy and a girl, maybe we have to get rid of the boy or the girl, something like that." But the documentary had already exposed what he was working on, and Schafer didn't want to renege on a promise: "If people were not watching I might have felt differently about their expectations. But because I felt like I knew what they were expecting, and I felt this need to live up to it, I made a decision to invest Double Fine's own money to make up the difference."

This meant putting all of Double Fine's recent profits from sales of back catalogue games like *Brütal Legend* and *Psychonauts* toward the completion of *Broken Age* – not an easy decision when the independent studio has no investors or parent company to fall back on if funds run out. "We were taking a risk, but it was appropriate. We really thought the game was coming out well, so it was a good risk of Double Fine money," Schafer says. But even this investment wouldn't entirely solve the problem: "That still made it really dangerous that we wouldn't make the last three or four months of the project. It would get us most of the way, and we could conceivably – if nothing slipped and everything went perfectly – finish the game with it. But then we'd be out of money that day and go out of business, like, that day."

Then Double Fine's business development VP, Justin Bailey, suggested splitting *Broken Age* in half and releasing the first part early, so early access profits could fund the rest of development. When they announced the plan to backers, Schafer says the initial response was positive: "A small percentage of our backers were upset by it, but once they understood that they were getting a bigger game than they backed and they wouldn't have to give any more money, they were pretty happy about it." But the tone quickly changed as the news spread beyond *Broken Age*'s core supporters. "We thought we'd have some time to publicly announce the release plan, but when it went immediately from the backer forums to the press, people took it a lot differently," Schafer explains. "A lot of people who were not paying attention to the project until



After its first Kickstarter, Double Fine introduced the idea of "slacker backers."



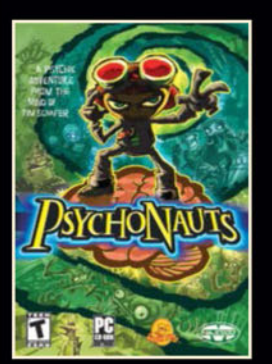
then, the last time they heard about it was the Kickstarter and then the next thing they heard was, 'Oh, they need more money.' That created an incredibly negative backlash among mostly non-backers." It didn't help that Double Fine had just completed a second Kickstarter for a turn-based tactical game, *Massive Chalice* – essentially pocketing fans' cash to fund a new project while admitting that they didn't have enough money to finish the first one.

He wasn't expecting the negativity, but Schafer wasn't completely surprised by the reaction. "A lot of people just don't like Kickstarter. They really think it's a scam. And they're just waiting for the story, waiting to dive all over it," he says. Still, he's confident about *Broken Age*'s release plan, and the situation hasn't dampened his enthusiasm for crowd funding in general: "They [Kickstarter sceptics] don't look at Kickstarter the same way I do, which is as a patronage of the arts. There's a creative person who wants to make something, and if you want to help me make it, here's a thank you gift in exchange, like [National Public Radio] gives you thank you gifts. It's not like you're buying the little hand-crank radio when you give to NPR."

In November 2012 Double Fine embarked on a new funding experiment by taking Amnesia Fortnight public. Following the same creative process that had yielded games like *Costume Quest*, *Stacking*, and *Iron Brigade*, Double Fine partnered with Humble Bundle to let fans review pitches, play prototypes, and vote for games they wanted greenlit. Besides generating revenue and publicity for Double Fine, the unconventional bundle drew the attention of Indie Fund, a funding source backed by successful devs like Jonathan Blow (*Braid*), Ron Carmel and Kyle Gabler (*World Of Goo*), and thatgamecompany co-founder Kellee Santiago. "They're interested in the indie ecosystem and having it be a healthy, thriving ecosystem, and they were also interested in doing something bigger than they had done in the past, that would make more of an impact on the whole games industry," Schafer says of Indie Fund. After reviewing the proposed games, Indie Fund offered $75,000 toward development of *Spacebase DF-9*, a sci-fi building sim, with other investors including Humble Bundle, developer The Behemoth, and former X-Play host Morgan Webb chipping in $325,000 more. »

DOUBLE FINE'S GAMES

Despite its size, Double Fine's indie spirit shines through. "With Amnesia Fortnight, a lot of the appeal is 'Wow, that's something I've never heard of before, let's definitely try it,'" says Schafer.



PSYCHONAUTS 2005

Schafer's first post-LucasArts game was a platformer set at a summer camp for the telepathically gifted, with the excellent Richard Horvitz (Invader Zim) voicing the lead. Originally published by Majesco for consoles and PC, Double Fine later regained the rights and ported it to Mac and Linux with support from angel investor Dracogen.

BRÜTAL LEGEND 2009



This heavy metal action-adventure RTS hybrid was a tough sell for publishers, who wanted Schafer to pick one genre or the other. EA released it for PS3 and Xbox 360 but pulled the plug on a sequel. A year ago Double Fine put out a PC version with new content.

COSTUME QUEST 2010 & STACKING 2011



An RPG set on Halloween and a puzzler starring Russian nesting dolls, these were the first Amnesia Fortnight releases. Double Fine recently got back the rights after THQ's liquidation.

SESAME STREET: ONCE UPON A MONSTER 2011



Double Fine pursued a *Sesame Street* licensing deal for this collection of minigames, which began as Amnesia Fortnight concept *Happy Song*. An Xbox 360 exclusive, the original PC prototype was in the Amnesia Fortnight Humble Bundle.

IRON BRIGADE 2011



This tower defence/shooter hybrid, published by Microsoft, is the lone hold-out in Double Fine's quest to own all of the games that have been worked on. ("Hopefully someday," Schafer says.)

HAPPY ACTION THEATER & KINECT PARTY 2012



Born out of Schafer's desire to create a Kinect product that his young daughter could enjoy, these augmented reality games let you mess around with Xbox's Kinect camera and motion controller.

MIDDLE MANAGER OF JUSTICE 2012 & DROPCHORD 2013



Double Fine tested out new platforms with two games financed by Dracogen: a free-to-play mobile game where you oversee a group of superheroes called *Middle Manager Of Justice*, and *Dropchord*, a motion-based music game that launched with the LEAP Motion controller.



THE CAVE 2013

Published by Sega, this adventure game with puzzle-platformer undertones, featuring a varied and quirky cast on individual journeys, came out of a partnership with Schafer's former LucasArts collaborator, Ron Gilbert.



BROKEN AGE 2014

Double Fine's first release funded by Kickstarter, the first half of this point-and-click coming of age story is available now. The rest is planned to release by summer.

MASSIVE CHALICE 2014

Double Fine's second Kickstarted project, a tactical role-playing game with a feudal fantasy setting, should be out around September.

SPACEBASE DF-9 & HACK 'N' SLASH 2014



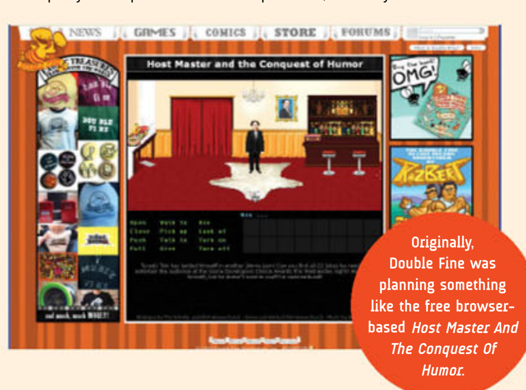
The public Amnesia Fortnight's top two contenders were financed by Indie Fund and friends. Sci-fi sim *Spacebase DF-9* is in early access alpha, *Hack 'N' Slash*, about an elf with hacking abilities, is promised for the first half of this year.



"Overall, I'm really happy with the process and what we make. We've had our ups and our downs and it's all making the documentary better."

» Initially the move raised eyebrows – as with its Kickstarter, Double Fine was again receiving money from a source some would argue should be reserved for developers with lesser means. But it quickly proved to be a sound business decision: two weeks after the alpha version went on sale, Spacebase recouped its investment, a success Indie Fund says "opens the door for us to support more projects of this magnitude in the future." Double Fine hopes for a repeat performance this spring with *Hack 'N' Slash*, a puzzle action game funded by the same group of supporters.

Schafer's studio may be independent, but can a company that experiences such staggering success, again and again, truly be classified as an indie? "To be honest, I agree, we are different. It is different when I launch a Kickstarter than when someone just out of college launches a Kickstarter, who no one knows. I think because of that we're in a different category, but we are independent in spirit in that we don't want to be told what to do," Schafer says. "There are so many different ways to define indie. Some of it is technical, it's just whether you're owned by a larger company. But Epic Games is independent, are they an indie



Originally, Double Fine was planning something like the free browser-based *Host Master And The Conquest Of Humor.*





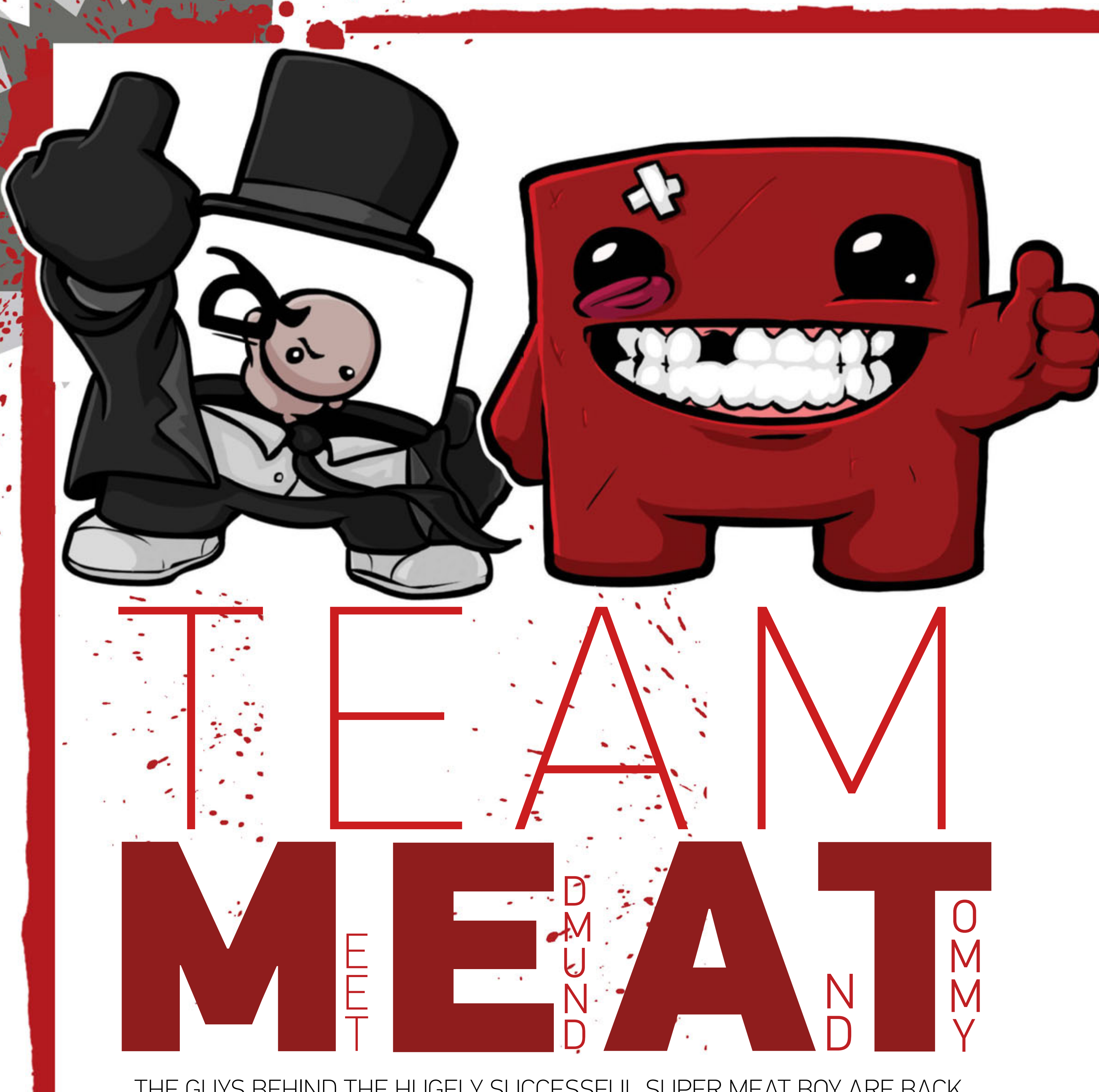
developer? And then you have companies that have independent spirit like Media Molecule. They're totally owned by Sony but they feel like an indie because of what they make. So if by one definition Epic is more indie than Media Molecule but by another definition, Media Molecule is more indie, how do you define that? Or a game like [thatgamecompany's] *Journey*, which was funded by Sony but is in some ways the epitome of an indie title."

Schafer has another take on the question: "There's a big machine out there that makes games. There's this process, large triple-A games made by this machine of publishers and developers all fitting into the process. And because of the money that's being risked, this process tends to eliminate certain risks and eliminate certain creative aspects of game making, and emit a product that is much like the Hollywood movie machine – large, expensive games that rely on established IPs, formulas, and sequels." Going by this definition, "indie is making games outside of the machine, and making games that speak to other needs that take risks, and speak with voices and to subjects that are not being handled by the machine, that would not survive the machinery," Schafer explains. "That's what indie is to me and I feel like we're definitely a part of that, but I do feel that we are in a different position to a lot of indies and we have to acknowledge that. We don't try to win the IGF awards and stuff like that, because we're in a different position and need to be respectful of that." He adds that Double Fine is trying to use its resources and expertise to help other indies, from giving advice about Kickstarter to organizing events like Day of the Devs (see boxout): "We can help put that kind of energy into the ecosystem and be a positive force. A force for good, hopefully."

> "WE ARE IN A DIFFERENT POSITION TO A LOT OF INDIES AND WE HAVE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT"

Broken Age may not be finished until later this year but Schafer says it's already had a positive impact on the studio, with publishers coming to them now and Double Fine more able to define the terms: "We don't have to take any bad deals. We don't have to take deals where they have too much creative control or they want to own the IP. We can say no to those kind of deals now." Since Double Fine owns (almost) all of its properties, it's making money off its games dating all the way back to *Psychonauts*. Most importantly, Schafer has achieved what he set out to do by starting his own company – controlling his creations, making the games he wants to make.

Back in 2012, when he first appealed to his fans on Kickstarter, the game he most wanted to make was a LucasArts-style adventure. Having had that chance, does he feel the same way today? "Yes and no. Now that we have this engine and this pipeline, it would be a shame not to make another one. But the whole reason a lot of games we make are different than the previous game is that I get this urge to try something different every time." Of course, as he's quick to point out, this has always been his style: "Even if you look at the difference between *Day Of The Tentacle* and *Full Throttle*, and then the difference between *Full Throttle* and *Grim Fandango*, you can see that there's always this pleasure… I'm going to do the complete opposite of what we did last."



TEAM MEAT

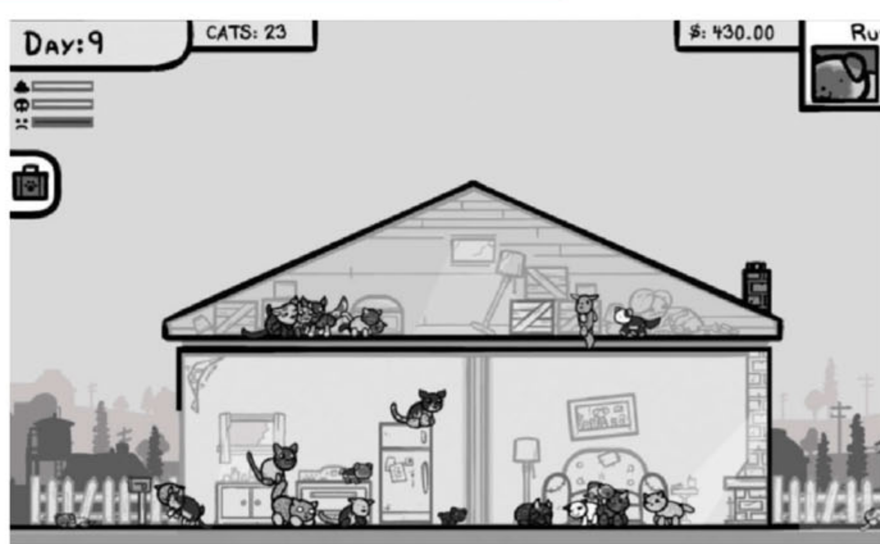
MEET EDMUND AND TOMMY

THE GUYS BEHIND THE HUGELY SUCCESSFUL SUPER MEAT BOY ARE BACK, NOW WITH INFINITE CATS. **GAMES™** CATCHES UP WITH THE INDIE DUO TO DISCUSS NEW PROJECTS, THE INDUSTRY TODAY, AND CREATIVE INTEGRITY

One of the strangest things about the games industry today is how the same number can have totally different meanings based on the title it is applied to. It's all a matter of perspective, you see. One million sales for, say, a new *Call Of Duty* or *Assassin's Creed* game would likely be conservative day-one estimates rather than lifetime expectations – with millions of dollars, thousands of hours and hundreds of people working on big-budget titles, one million just isn't enough. Hell, even five or six sometimes isn't enough. But when it comes to a downloadable game created by a team of two, one million is an incredible milestone – that represents a sales-to-staff ratio that something like *ACIV* would need to sell well over 250 million copies to match. In the indie world, one million is still huge and it's one that brutal platformer *Super Meat Boy* soared past in just over a year on sale, despite being one of the most sadistic videogames ever created.

"The environment has changed – the rules have changed," explains Team Meat's talkative artist, Edmund McMillen. "Videogames have changed drastically over the years and I think the reason why





■ Right: *Mew-Genics!* might look cute and cuddly but beneath all the fluff, there's a hell of a lot of clever stuff going on. Above: Just avoid all the deadly blades and get to Bandage Girl as quickly as possible. How hard can it be, right? Oh. Oh dear.

Mario and *Ghosts 'N' Goblins* and all those games were so difficult back then and that their design was more frustrating than difficult was that all those people had previously developed for back then was arcade. And that's all about getting as many quarters as you can from the player, so the penalty was really high- that's how you made money. Coming out of the arcade generation to the home console generation, the difficulty came through but frustration factor grew immensely – you couldn't just pump more quarters in to get more credits. With *Meat Boy*, we designed around the way things had changed. We took the penalty down to zero but kept the difficulty really high. In fact, we could push the difficulty much higher because of that reduced penalty and frustration."

Punishing it may be, but nail one of *Meat Boy*'s devious obstacle courses and the sense of achievement is overwhelming. It's crazy to discover, in fact, that the glorious post-stage replay feature (where all your failed attempts play out at the same time) was a bit of coding improvisation on the part of Team Meat's technical wizard, Tommy Refenes. "There was a video of a hacked SNES emulator where this guy was playing *Super Mario World*," he recalls. "It would take all of his recordings and layer them over one another and I was like, 'Oh, I could do that in real time!', so we did. It was just a neat thing, and a good reward too." Such on-the-fly additions and improvisations seem to be an integral part of Team Meat's approach to development, in fact. "Yeah, I think that's kind of our philosophy – it's certainly mine," nods McMillen. "And I think that philosophy is the reason why *Mew-Genics!* has taken a year. We thought we'd be done within a year but we're on one year of development and still have a way to go. That could be because I tend to improvise as I design, but it's harder to do so when you're working on a game that's open-ended. You add something and it balloons into something else – that's definitely something I do, something we have done and something that's both awesome and awful."

"WE DIDN'T NAME OURSELVES. WE WERE JUST GIVEN THE NAME BY NINTENDO IN A RANDOM PRESS RELEASE"

This approach is something only indies really have the luxury of employing, as McMillen goes on to explain. "When you have a company and have a million different people doing a million different things and have to have somebody to keep them all on track, you can't come in one day and be all, like, 'Hey, can we make it so the cats eat their own shit?' That's not in the original design document – it's gonna cause a ton of problems because it'd have to go through all these different pockets and teams that would have to get together and agree upon it. But with us, it's just like 'Yeah, we can probably do that – that'll add a lot more, so let's do that'. We have that freedom to do whatever would be fun or cool and I think the majority of what happened with *Meat Boy* and what's happening now with *Mew-Genics!* revolves around that. We'll just get these wild ideas to do something crazy because it might be fun. And we do it."

Refenes interjects. "You realise that we're the only people in the history of time that have said 'It would be really cool if the cats ate their own shit', right?" he asks, although McMillen's answer is typically confident. "I like to think that is innovation," he laughs.

We're also surprised to learn that the duo's appropriate moniker wasn't an in-house creation. "We didn't name ourselves," reveals McMillen in a strange tangent. "We were just given the name by Nintendo in a random press release and we were just like, 'Yeah, okay'. Somebody asked what the names were that we thought of before and we realised that we never talked about it! We never discussed anything – we just became Team Meat. I think it's fine – it works. I mean, it's kind of an honour, right?" With *Meat Boy*'s no-show on a Nintendo platform and contractual obligations with Microsoft meaning that he couldn't appear on PSN either, Team Meat is yet to make much of an impact on the console market. But even now, with that new console smell still fresh in the air following two huge new launches, the duo doesn't seem all that interested in consoles. »

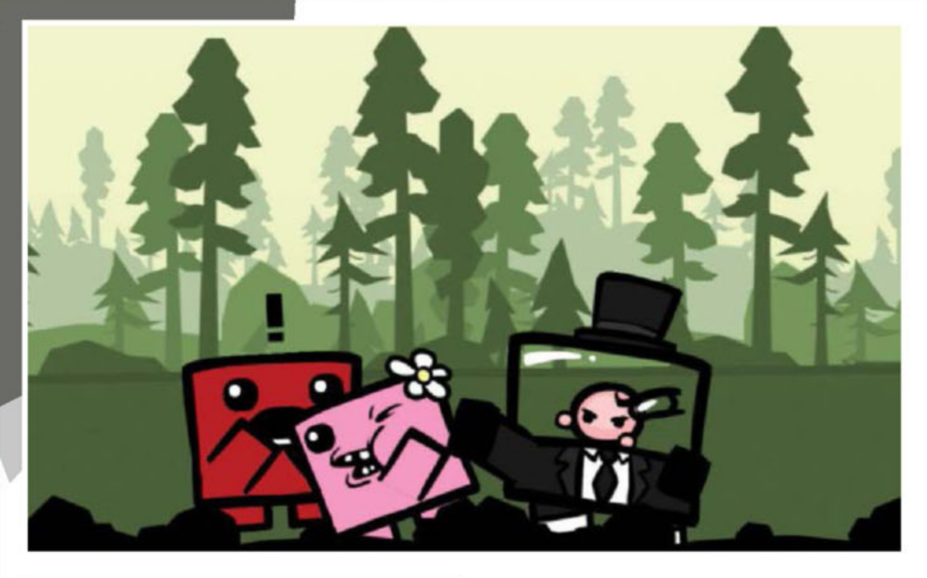
MEET TOMMY

"HI, I'M TOMMY AND I BRING THE PROGRAMMING…"



■ TOMMY REFENES, the technical mastermind behind the 1s and 0s that make *Super Meat Boy* work, started out in server and website coding in 2001, before moving into games in 2005. He joined Streamline Studios that year, assisting in porting the Unreal engine from Xbox to 360 as well as working on WiiWare title *HoopWorld*. In 2006, he founded studio Pillowfort with game designer Aubrey Hesselgren – its debut title, *Goo!*, was cancelled. Refenes also developed several iOS games around the end of the decade, with *Zits & Giggles* being pulled from the App Store after Refenes made some less than complimentary comments about Apple's storefront at GDC 2010, comparing its games to the Tiger handhelds of old – games sold on names and brands rather than gameplay. Refenes made some similarly incendiary comments in *Indie Game: The Movie*, including describing games like *Halo* as 'shit'. "I don't like 'em. It's a personal opinion," he elaborates. "I don't like the games. I'm not good at the games. The work that goes into them is amazing and anybody that works on them should be proud, but I don't like them. I also don't like Katy Perry, I don't really like a lot of news sites, and I don't like your kid's drawings. You can be proud of them but I think they suck. That's just me, I'm sorry!"

KEY TITLES
■ Grey Matter (2008) ■ Beat! Music Memory Match (2009) ■ HoopWorld (2010)



■ Left: Retro game and pop culture references were everywhere in *Super Meat Boy*. We're expecting *Mew-Genics!* to do the same. Below: *Meat Boy* is still coming to iOS, but it's been put on hold while the duo finishes *Mew-Genics!*.



MEET EDMUND

"HI, I'M EDMUND AND I BRING THE DESIGN AND DOODLES..."



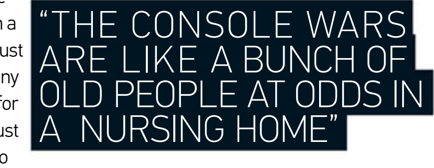
■ AN ARTIST WORKING out of Santa Cruz, California, Edmund McMillen has been creating games for over a decade, having started out as an indie comic artist. McMillen was the original artist and animator on *Braid* before David Hellman took over for the final version, but today he's better known for his own titles. Team Meat might only have a single game to its name until *Mew-Genics!* launches but McMillen has released 16 titles, most of which have been Flash games – the list includes award winners and nominees such as *Gish*, *Aether* and the original version of *Meat Boy*, which has since been played by millions on sites like Newgrounds where fellow indie codehouse The Behemoth also shot to fame with *Alien Hominid*. McMillen is open about his motivations, no surprise to anyone who saw him open up for the camera in *Indie Game: The Movie*. "I think it's hard to make art without being honest and the easiest way to be honest with art is to go with what you know," he tells us. "And the thing you know the best is usually yourself. I don't think I'll ever make a game where I'm not basing some aspect of it on something I've experienced or enjoyed."

KEY TITLES

■ Gish (2004) ■ Aether (2008) ■ Meat Boy (2008)

"We're at a weird point overall," muses McMillen. "I've never cared so little about an iteration or generation of consoles before in my life, and I was such a huge videogame and console fanboy. I went to the launch of pretty much every big console that there's been for ages and worked at Gamestop for a really long time but after the Wii, it all just kinda fell apart. It's come down to the fact that it's not the consoles – it's just the games. There's really not that much interesting out there. We'd like to work with Nintendo. We've tried to make it happen multiple times and they've done a great job in aiding that.

"But in the end, things just got messed up and we couldn't do stuff. It'd be an honour to be featured on a Nintendo console but at this point, their current console is not necessarily one to take a risk and develop for. 3DS is cool though, right?" Refenes drops another logic bomb. "But still, why kill yourself for that when you could just put it on Steam or the App Store and not have to worry about *anything*? Why do that?" he asks. "It's come down to that," McMillen agrees. "The console wars are… I don't know… what's an analogy for something that's barely a war? It's like a bunch of old people that have been at odds in a nursing home and they just don't talk to each other any more." Refenes steps in for the punchline. "They're just waiting for the first one to die," he laughs.



That said, the pair seem receptive to the indie-friendly new policies put in place by platform holders like Sony, even if there are apparently new potential problems to face there. "I think it'll definitely make it more interesting," says McMillen. "I don't know that it'll be a lucrative thing, though. I always question that – I wonder if it'll be a worthwhile thing for Sony to do. I really want it to be, of course. I didn't care at all about my Vita until *Spelunky* came out on it. More indie games on the platform – yes, amazing, great, But unless they're exclusive to the platform, why don't I just play it on Steam, where I can eventually buy it for 80 per cent off?" It's a sentiment clearly echoed in the studio's fan base too, with the PC version of *Super Meat Boy* vastly outgrossing its console counterpart.

"Especially now, it's really quite a double-edged sword," adds Refenes. "Because Sony is so open about it, they're not going to demand exclusivity. So what's going to happen is – especially given that the PS4 architecture is very similar to PC – that a PC version of some PS4 game isn't that much of a stretch any more."

That single mention of *Spelunky* is enough to set the two off, Refenes regaling us with tales of his underground exploits amassed through hundreds of hours of play time. "It's a really entertaining game but I don't think it's any harder than *Mario*, realistically," McMillen adds. "But sometimes it does fuck you over and there's that luck-based element to it. But you can also just get really lucky and get a jetpack and blow through the whole level."

Conversation turns to *Spelunky*'s random generation, something also seen in McMillen's own *The Binding Of Isaac*. "I think random generation is the new arcade formula for games – a new way to get people constantly replaying," he states. "But instead of playing for the high score, they're playing for the enjoyment factor of the new experience every time. It kind of goes hand in hand with the way we design – our improvised design with this improvised gameplay. I wouldn't say it's the future of games but I would say that it's a good… I don't know if it's a genre or what but it's a new rough design architecture that you can design games around and just make them endless, like an arcade experience again in a way."

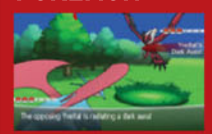
That's one popular trend that the duo clearly approve of, then, but there's another that doesn't get nearly as warm a reception when it comes up – microtransactions. "If *Spelunky* let you put in a dollar to buy the jetpack on the first level, they would be millionaires!" laughs McMillen. "But it'd cheapen the experience and ruin the game. There are two things with videogames and those two things are business and art. In the mainstream, it really leans towards business. In some ways, when you go into *FarmVille*



THE DNA OF MEW-GENICS!

TEAM MEAT'S NEW PROJECT DRAWS INSPIRATION FROM AND PAYS HOMAGE TO ALL CORNERS OF GAMING. HERE ARE A FEW OF THE LINKS WE'VE MANAGED TO PICK OUT SO FAR, BUT THERE ARE BOUND TO BE COUNTLESS MORE…

POKÉMON



BREED, COLLECT, TRAIN, battle, evolve… many of the buzz words used in describing *Mew-Genics!* evoke Nintendo's monster franchise. Team Meat has simplified the concept to be about a single species, sure, but there's a depth and complexity here that goes way beyond *Pokémon*'s often-annoying RNG antics. Level up your purpose-trained cats, send them into battle or ship them off to pet shows – what you do and how you play is entirely up to you, so you're free to be a battler, a breeder, a hoarder, a boffin or whatever you like. Hopefully we'll be able to teach Mr Tiddles to use Earthquake, too…

SPORE



WILL WRIGHT'S EVOLUTION sim was arguably a better concept than it was a game, but some of its clever DNA witchcraft lives on in *Mew-Genics!* – cats all have their own stats, traits, ailments, with offspring generated based on the details of the parents. In addition, how your kitties are raised can have an effect: some of these are temporary, others apply to a single cat while still more can be passed down. It's all very complex and very clever, but Team Meat has already done all the hard work – you just need to shove cats together until you get one with the stats you're after.

THE SIMS

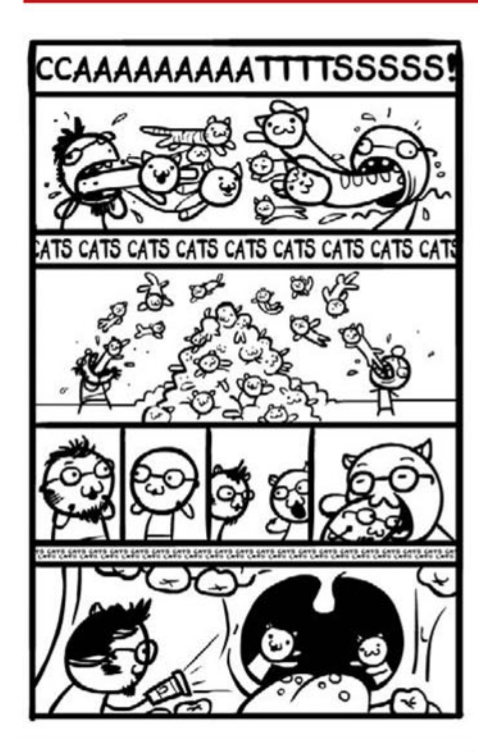


EARNING ENOUGH TO pimp out your house is pretty much the entire goal of EA's life sim but here, it's only the beginning. Furniture plays a major part in the development of your cats, sometimes to the point of having life-changing effects – a particularly fancy dresser might suddenly start turning your cats glamorous, for instance, while the armchair where an old cat died might make others inconsolable. Breeding, evolution and mutation are huge factors in how a cat turns out, sure, but nurture is almost as important as nature – your choice of coffee table has never been so important.

GRAN TURISMO



IF YOU'VE PUT enough time into any of Polyphony's racers to expand your garage to a ludicrous size, you'll know all about the thrill of hoarding. A typical end-game *GT* garage is filled with more cars than you could possibly ever need – apply that same logic to cats and you're on the right track here. Although each new cat is unique, favourites can be cryogenically frozen and their DNA tinkered with, allowing you to (hopefully) reproduce at least some aspect of them down the line. If your house isn't already too full of cats and tat by that point, anyway.





■ Left: McMillen produces loads of comics and original doodles for the Team Meat blog – keep it bookmarked for all kinds of silliness, most of it cat related. Above: Options will be limited when starting out in *Mew-Genics!*, but expect the house to fill up with cats, crap, and cat crap fairly quickly.

or whatever the most abusive, manipulative, money-grabbing microtransaction game out there may be, that is a 100 per cent business model – that has nothing to do with videogames. It's just manipulating people into handing over money. It's not a game – there's no art there. They're just using the illusion of a game and they're just gonna juice you with this business. But yeah, I think when you're making a game, you have to have integrity when it comes to design and the art of designing a game. You can't venture too far into the business side of things without completely tainting what you're doing."

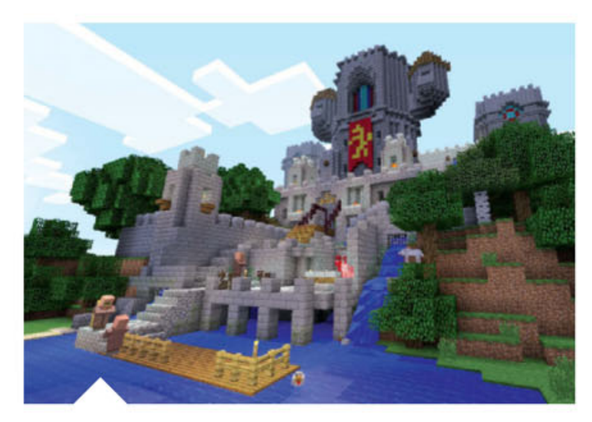
Refenes takes the point a step further. "It works the same way if you try to appease everybody. 'We're going to take this out of our game because some people found it offensive'… I know there was one zombie game where they shot kids or something and I think there was an uproar but I don't think they changed it – their game was a free game and they just said 'You don't have to play it'. But then there are other developers who, if somebody gets upset about something, feel the need to just pull it because they don't want to offend or whatever. But it's the same sort of thing – they might as well just start throwing microtransactions in there and try and make a shitload of money out of manipulating people because all they're doing is compromising what they wanted to do in the first place." And McMillen's agreement comes with a warning to other developers.

"It's very easy to self-censor or just turn your game into a turd by trying to appeal to everyone and worry about the money that you'll eventually make and how to maximise that," he says. "When we all got into this, every year at GDC there were tons of 'how to monetise your game' things going on. And I realise that there are a large number of people who are purely in this for profit and don't really give a shit about anything else, and that's fine. But if you set out to make something that's artful or to push game design in a positive direction, don't lie to yourself and think that you're doing anything good by compromising your vision or monetising your game because you need a few extra bucks. Your game's gonna suffer."



25 GROUNDBREAKING INDIE GAMES

IN THE SPACE OF LITTLE OVER A DECADE, THE GAMES INDUSTRY HAS SEEN A DELUGE OF ACCLAIMED INDEPENDENT TITLES. WITH LESS RISK PLACED ON THE OUTCOME OF A GAMES' SUCCESS, MORE FREEDOM TO CREATE AS THE DEVELOPERS SEE FIT, AND WITH PASSION TRUMPING MONEY AS THE MAIN MOTIVATING FACTOR FOR DEVELOPMENT, WE'VE SEEN A WAVE OF INDIE GAMES THAT HAVE CHANGED BOTH THE WAY WE PLAY GAMES AND THE WAY THEY ARE PERCEIVED. JOIN US AS WE LOOK AT 25 NOTABLE GAMES FROM THE LAST DECADE THAT SHAPED NOT ONLY THE INDIE CANON OF THE LAST GENERATION, BUT WILL ALSO BE REMEMBERED FOR SHAKING THE FOUNDATIONS OF GAME DESIGN



1 MINECRAFT
Developer: **Mojang** Release: **2009**

What if? It's this question that forms the core of the interactive gaming experience, and the answer will often define the worth of the experience. What if I press this switch? What if I take route B rather than route A? What if I hack this turret and plant C4 by the door? Few games have answered this question so comprehensively and so enticingly as Markus 'Notch' Persson's ultimate internet darling: *Minecraft*.

Minecraft succeeds brilliantly in offering its players the space and the potential within to do almost anything they wish. Emerging from the foundations of a wonderfully simple two-pronged control scheme – create with the left button, destroy with the right – players are able to construct entire stories of their own, rather than simply experience them. That might be becoming a recluse in a hut complete with a moat and traps; building a farm to settle down in; sculpting the entire kingdom of Westeros out of the terrain. Whatever your wishes, *Minecraft* scales to meet them.

The gathering and survival elements of the game ensure a sense of rhythm that will keep any player hooked for countless hours, but it's *Minecraft*'s celebration of creativity over destruction that truly makes it stand out from the crowd. It enables players to make a world that is theirs, and theirs alone – an endless box of digital Lego, if you will, with no limits enforced by skill. It's a game for everyone, as its 13 million players will attest. What if? In *Minecraft*, the possibilities are limited only by your imagination.

2 BRAID
Developer: **Number None** Release: **2008**

"Let me take my deepest flaws and vulnerabilities and put them in the game, and see what happens," said Jonathan Blow at the conclusion of *Indie Game: The Movie*. A time manipulation 2D platformer on the surface, *Braid*'s gameplay itself posed abstract, deeply personal questions. However, the ability to rewind time isn't simply about undoing mistakes; creator Blow devises a new twist on the concept for each new set of levels, rethinking his ideas and toying with his core conceit of time as gameplay. Here, the past, present and future are less abstract dimensions of order and more your playthings to be tinkered with to achieve a goal. In terms of lateral thinking, the arsenal of abilities you gain and the way that they're implemented throughout the game are akin to Valve's masterful *Portal*. No other media would be capable of communicating this story so poignantly and intelligently.

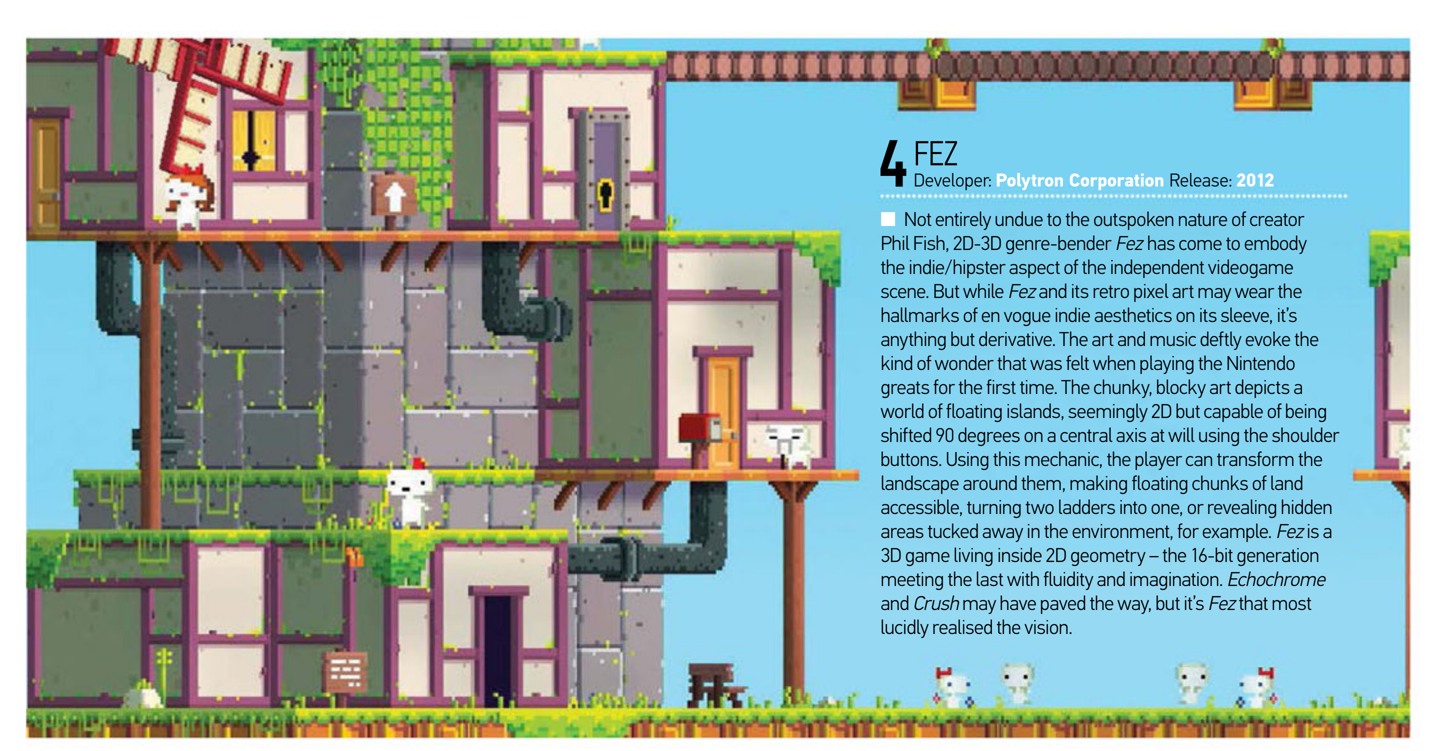




3 ANGRY BIRDS
Developer: **Rovio Entertainment** Release: **2009**

Few could have predicted the extraordinary success of *Angry Birds*, least of all creator Rovio, which at one point was close to cancelling the game. Fast-forward to today and the series has near-overtaken contemporary culture. You can barely turn without seeing Jaakko Iisalo's cartoon designs adorning everything from lunchboxes to haute couture fashion designs. There's even a feature film scheduled for 2016. Why such success? One could argue that it was a case of being in the right place at the right time: *Angry Birds* owes a great deal to the countless flash-based physics games that it followed, and the fact that the smartphone market was starting to truly take off at the time of its release. That it cost just 69p couldn't have hurt either.

But with nearly two billion downloads across all platforms and editions – making *Angry Birds* the largest mobile app success the world has known – there was something else to its formula. Intuitive controls, satisfyingly punchy physics and an accomplished simplicity all make up *Angry Birds*' greatest achievement – making gaming something *everyone* can enjoy, no matter their age or background. It's thanks to its broad appeal, the emergence of touchscreen-enabled gaming and that final touch of tight, enjoyable, on-the-go gaming – not to mention silly-looking pigs – that *Angry Birds* became one of the best reasons to go out and buy yourself a smartphone.



4 FEZ
Developer: **Polytron Corporation** Release: **2012**

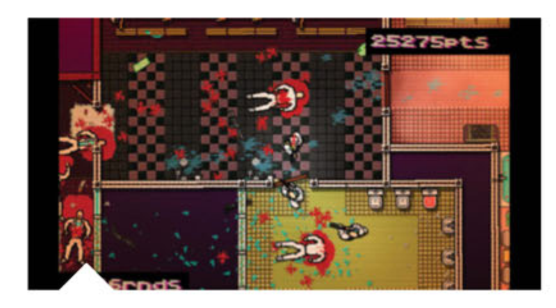
Not entirely undue to the outspoken nature of creator Phil Fish, 2D-3D genre-bender *Fez* has come to embody the indie/hipster aspect of the independent videogame scene. But while *Fez* and its retro pixel art may wear the hallmarks of en vogue indie aesthetics on its sleeve, it's anything but derivative. The art and music deftly evoke the kind of wonder that was felt when playing the Nintendo greats for the first time. The chunky, blocky art depicts a world of floating islands, seemingly 2D but capable of being shifted 90 degrees on a central axis at will using the shoulder buttons. Using this mechanic, the player can transform the landscape around them, making floating chunks of land accessible, turning two ladders into one, or revealing hidden areas tucked away in the environment, for example. *Fez* is a 3D game living inside 2D geometry – the 16-bit generation meeting the last with fluidity and imagination. *Echochrome* and *Crush* may have paved the way, but it's *Fez* that most lucidly realised the vision.



5 CAVE STORY

Developer: **Studio Pixel** Release: **2004**

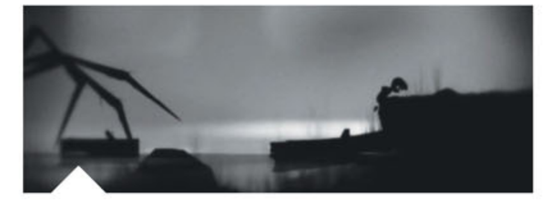
■ Initially created using PC freeware and designed by Daisuke 'Pixel' Amaya, *Cave Story* is an unashamed metroidvania-inspired homage. A wonderful concoction of rock solid action, engaging narrative and impressive level design – the kind of singular vision that could only come from the mind of a single developer. If the game had been released alongside the *Zeldas* and *Mega Mans* that inspired it, it would still be considered one of the greats of its generation. It reinforced the continued relevance of 8-bit mechanics on the cusp of a new generation.



6 HOTLINE MIAMI

Developer: **Dennaton Games** Release: **2009**

■ Do you hack apart the thugs in the kitchen first, or open up on the gangsters in the toilet with machine gun spray? *Hotline Miami* challenges you to think through each situation, but once the trigger is pulled, you're off on a whirlwind of brutality, conscious thought drained as you splatter each level in bright red pixels. Few forms of entertainment, let alone just games, have ruminated on the interlinked nature of violence as entertainment as intelligently as *Hotline Miami*.



7 LIMBO

Developer: **Playdead** Release: **2010**

■ A small boy awakes in a gloom-drenched forest, the backdrop a vague, shifting grey mist populated only with the glowing white dots of fireflies. As you press on, the world slowly reveals itself; black silhouettes of ramshackle structures, devious traps, little boy-eating spiders and bizarre sci-fi machines. *Limbo* is achievement in atmosphere, placing you in a world that oozes mood. Yet it's also cunningly designed, offering puzzles that are unified by the physical properties of the world.





8 FLOWER

Developer: **thatgamecompany**
Release: **2009**

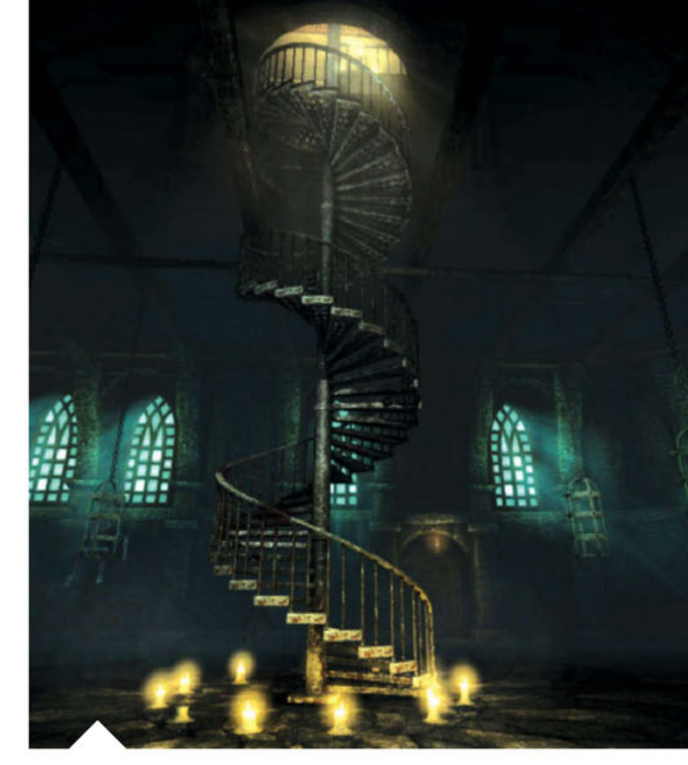
■ While *Journey* is surely thatgamecompany's masterpiece, *Flower* was the game that cemented the company's reputation. Following on the heels of *flOw*, the similarly 'Zen' *Flower* managed to be lyrical, delicate, contemplative, and even, dare we say it, transcendent, *Flower* saw players turn empty plains into verdant, arable fields. That it conveys its narrative so peacefully and yet so engagingly is impressive enough, but even more so is that fact that *Flower* proved the Sixaxis wasn't just a gimmick. It showed that, approached with the right thinking, the me-too PS3 controller could be a genuinely experience-enhancing addition.



9 SUPER MEAT BOY

Developer: **Team Meat**
Release: **2010**

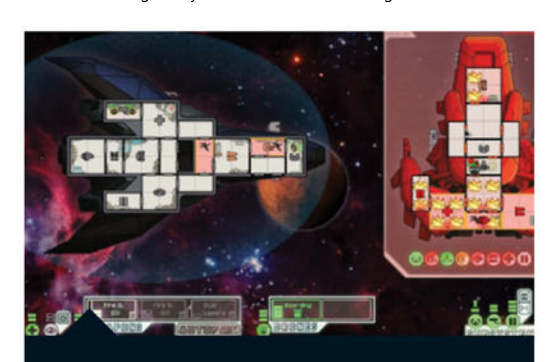
■ Never unfair but with little to no room for error, *Super Meat Boy* is the king of masochistic gaming, a masterpiece of brutality. A throwback to the halcyon era of 8- and 16-bit classics, *Super Meat Boy* is a savagely hard twitch platformer that demands the utmost dexterity and skill from its players. Instadeath respawns force you to try and try again until your thumbs have been ingrained with the necessary muscle memory. It hits that sweet spot between pain and entertainment with pixel-perfect precision.



10 AMNESIA: THE DARK DESCENT

Developer: **Frictional Games** Release: **2010**

■ It takes real nerve to do a horror game right, because if you pull it off, you're risking turning away the portion of your audience with too nervous a disposition to play. The opposite of a power fantasy, *Amnesia* strips away weaponry entirely, leaving you bereft of any dominance whatsoever. Frictional's most ingenious idea, however, is not even allowing you to *look* at the creatures that hound you, lest you lose your grip on sanity. Something is less scary once it's been seen and understood, so *Amnesia* keeps its horrors hidden. Frictional uses the best weapon it has – your own imagination – which it turns against you with almost unnerving skill.



11 FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT

Developer: **Subset Games** Release: **2012**

■ *FTL: Faster Than Light* succeeds thanks to the simplicity of its core conceit: what if you were the commander of a spacecraft, rather than the pilot? While most space simulators are concerned with explosive space bound aerobatics, this RTS roguelike focuses in on the management of critical systems, fires and hull breaches. Permadeath looms as you battle for survival across a series of missions that can go beyond punishing to the point of feeling unfair. The difficulty level may pitch and surge unpredictably, but it's the choices that are made therein that generate memorable stories of bravery, split-second decision making and old-fashioned good luck in the face of dire odds. It transforms unrelenting difficulty from unwelcome ordeal into a narrative of courage and tenacity, something that can only be achieved through the most considered game design. Yet it's through its gruelling challenge that *FTL* achieves that greatest of videogame feats – turning sprites into a universe and pixels into people.

12 THE WALKING DEAD
Developer: **Telltale Games** Release: **2012**

The Walking Dead succeeded for the same reason as the comic that preceded it – this is a zombie story about people, not headshots. Whether it's forcing players to make terrible, impossible decisions regarding the lives of others, or softening its narrative with the ember of hope in the relationship between Lee and Clementine, *The Walking Dead* put story first and foremost, and despite being a very deceptively linear tale, gave the player a powerful sense of control and accountability.





13 WORLD OF GOO
Developer: **2D Boy** Release: **2008**

Physics done well can transform a game from good to great. Such is the case with *World Of Goo*, which layers its science with a delectable sense of fun and whimsy. Playing with an organic fluidity that constantly keeps you on your toes, *World Of Goo* balances mathematics, game design and charm with a seemingly effortless capacity. It's easily the most fun and personality-infused game built around a core of physics that there is, beating even innovative greats like *Crayon Physics Deluxe* to the top spot.

14 BIT.TRIP BEAT
Developer: **Gaijin Games** Release: **2009**



"Avoid missing ball for high score"; a simple instruction, yet one that can still deliver on intense gameplay, as evidenced by this rhythm action-cum-side scroller WiiWare title. Like *Pong* – but perhaps on mind-altering drugs – *Bit.Trip Beat* stands as testament to the fact that you don't need a huge open world to be classed as entertainment. A paddle, some pixels, and some thumping chiptunes can get the dopamine pumping just as fast.



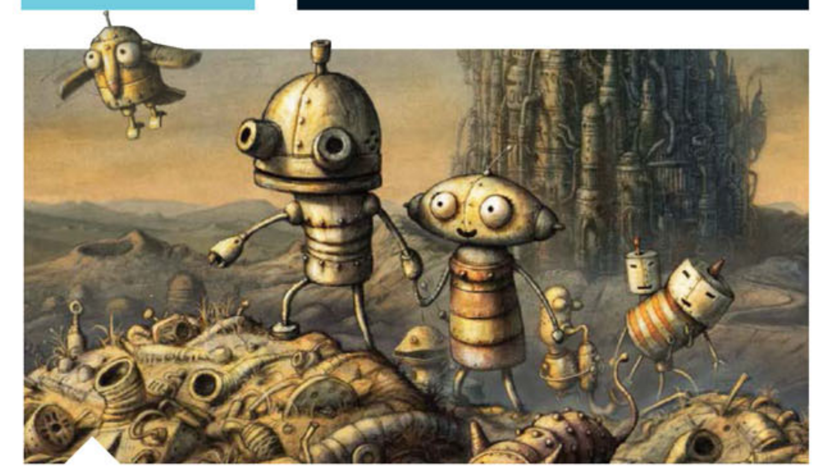
15 SPELUNKY
Developer: **Derek Yu** Release: **2009**

'Procedurally-generated' at its worst can mean a characterless experience. However, *Spelunky* is not your usual roguelike. Here the algorithm created by Derek Yu pieces levels together as if they were artfully crafted. The result is a surprising emergent gauntlet. Each level is challenging, rewarding and entirely unique, and impressively houses the intertwining mechanics of the game with poise.



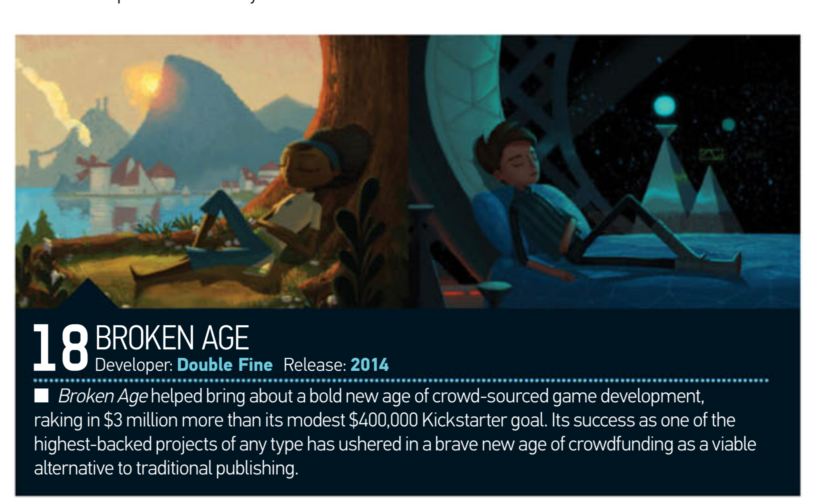
16 EVE ONLINE
Developer: **CCP Games** Release: **2003**

The seemingly perpetual *Eve* continues to succeed due to its focus on human interaction; allowing players to carve out their own experience in an ever-expanding universe. Its players' collective instinct has formed countless new narratives, characters and worlds – a feat that no other form of entertainment can lay claim to. "Nothing compares to a player that is enabled to affect the universe," says CCP.



17 MACHINARIUM
Developer: **Amanita Design** Release: **2009**

Machinarium plays in a beautifully hand-drawn world of rust and grey and is traditionally a point-and-click at its core, often leaving you stumped on a single screen all weekend. Buoyed by effortless warmth, a delightful story and an offbeat world, it's proof that point-and-click gaming is far from dead. There's still a place for it in today's world of bloodshed and violence.



18 BROKEN AGE
Developer: **Double Fine** Release: **2014**

Broken Age helped bring about a bold new age of crowd-sourced game development, raking in $3 million more than its modest $400,000 Kickstarter goal. Its success as one of the highest-backed projects of any type has ushered in a brave new age of crowdfunding as a viable alternative to traditional publishing.



19 SLENDER: THE EIGHT PAGES

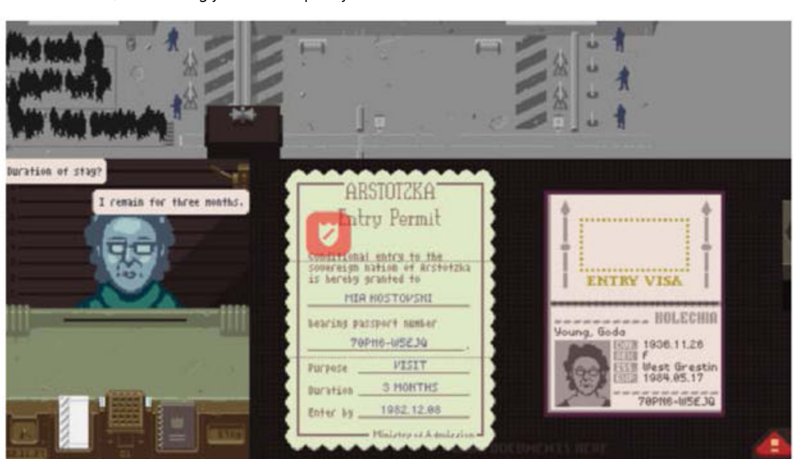
Developer: **Parsec Productions** Release: **2012**

■ *The Blair Witch Project* proved that horror didn't need to be expensive to be scary. It was in stripping away the bells and whistles that it succeeded as one of the most effective horror movies of its age. The same goes for *Slender*. With nothing but a minimalist forest, a grainy filter, and some truly terrifying sound effects, *Slender* is one of the most primal experiences available in gaming.

22 PAPERS, PLEASE

Developer: **Lucas Pope** Release: **2013**

■ Working as a border control officer of the communist state of Arstotzka, your job is to approve the passage of civilians into the country. As immigration laws change, you soon find yourself separating loved ones and keeping parents apart from their children, all in order to keep your own family healthy and warm. The game forces you to look inward, confronting your own capacity to commit atrocious acts.



20 CANABALT



Developer: **Adam Saltsman** Release: **2009**

■ *Canabalt* didn't just toy with old genres; it created a new one. Adam Saltsman's flash game is credited with the invention of the endless runner sub-genre, going on to inspire the likes of *Jetpack Joyride*. The thrill of perpetual motion and the addictive pull of the distance ticker in the top right corner make this one of the most difficult smartphone titles to put down.

23 DEAR ESTHER

Developer: **The Chinese Room**
Release: **2008 (mod), 2012 (remake)**



■ *Dear Esther*'s flaunting of videogame convention has seen many question its validity as a game, but *Dear Esther*'s story couldn't be achieved in any other medium. Like *Myst*, it's a visual experience, immersing players in a narrative, the pacing and discovery of which wouldn't work within the pages of a book or in a cinema. It's about ownership of narrative, and thought provoking no matter your criticisms of the game.

24 THE STANLEY PARABLE

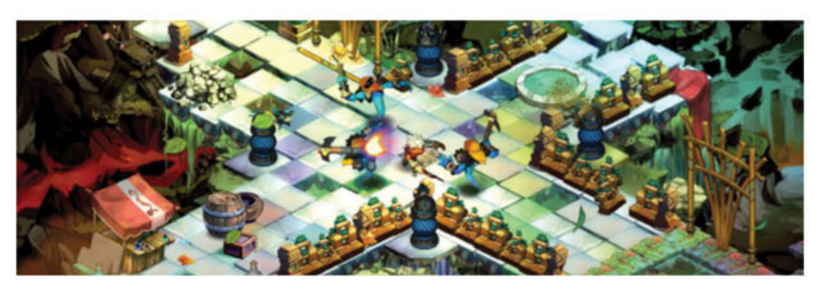
Developer: **Davey Wredent (mod), Galactic Café (remake)** Release: **2011**

■ In your choice to abide with or rebel against the narrative voice, *The Stanley Parable* plays on the illusion of free will in videogames, pushing games into a new era of self-aware, postmodern introspection. It's titles like this that will be remembered for exploring and pushing against the defining characteristics of the medium.

21 PASSAGE

Developer: **Jason Rohrer** Release: **2007**

■ In five short minutes, Jason Rohrer's *Passage* takes us on a journey of birth, life and mortality, all on a field of 100x16 pixels. The experience has been known to make many a player cry, evoking universal truths through its simple, powerful design. It's proof that games don't need mo-cap suites and high-paid voice actors to be emotionally resonant – they need only stir what already exists within the player.



25 BASTION

Developer: **Supergiant Games** Release: **2011**

■ Beautiful, deep and full of emotional resonance, *Bastion* is a dungeon crawler that has forced many to rethink what a downloadable title could be. There's the throaty narration that blurs the line between player agency and authored experience, the gradually forming and shifting world, the deceptively deep RPG mechanics; it's a near poetic experience, proving that even XBLA games can harness the power of poignancy. From this point on, 'downloadable' didn't need to just mean 'fun'.

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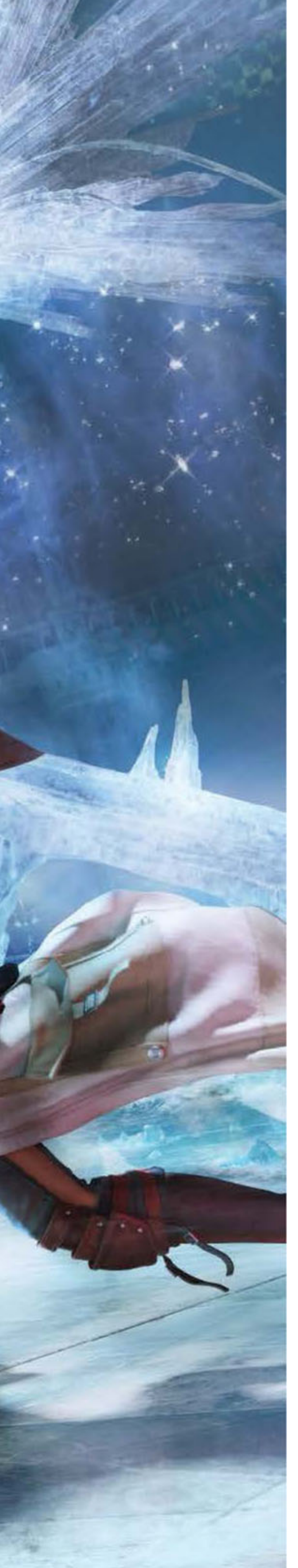
Reviews



94

Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII

Does Lightning strike thrice in Square Enix's curious sequel?



THE AVERAGE

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A MUTED PERFORMANCE PROVING THE LAW OF DIMINISHING RETURNS

Lightning Returns: Final Fantasy XIII

Square Enix's business strategy with the *Final Fantasy XIII* franchise has been consistently surprising. The first game, as a core entry to the flagship JRPG series, felt like a huge departure from everything the series was, alienating some fans but proving that Square Enix was willing to take risks and attempt innovation in a stagnating genre. Then *Final Fantasy XIII-2* came along – very much a sequel that nobody asked for, attempting to right the wrongs of its predecessor. This worked to an extent as *XIII-2* took players out of the boxed structure imposed in *XIII* and provided an experience infinitely more satisfying than the original.

It's a shame, then, that *Lightning Returns* seems to suffer from a myopic confusion – it's a game that struggles with its identity, fighting to wrangle a place between *XIII* and *XIII-2* as far as gameplay is concerned, and ultimately projecting itself as a garbled narrative mess. Square Enix reportedly spent $65 million on getting the Crystal Engine in working order, and its insistence on using the engine for every *Final Fantasy XIII* release has resulted in a game that looks mid-generational at best. This close to the end of the PS3's and Xbox 360's lifespans, and after having the title soak up so much budget, there is no excuse for any game to be so plagued by texture pop-in and jagged edges.

Any hardcore *Final Fantasy* fan wants two central things when they boot up their newest purchase: a decent, emotionally driven story and an engaging, complicated battle system. At least *Lightning Returns* offers the latter, because we're confident in saying that this is – by far – the worst *Final Fantasy* narrative we've had the displeasure of being subjected to. At least *X-2* made some sort of sense.

The over-arching theme sees Lightning unfrozen from crystal stasis 500 years after the events of *XIII-2* by an All-God figure, Bhunivelze. Conveniently left out of much of the lore until now, Bhunivelze is an overseer of sorts to the Gods that have systematically been bumped off in the series so far. Using Lightning's sister Serah as a bartering chip to coerce Light into becoming the 'saviour' of his world, Bhunivelze tasks the pink-haired protagonist with purging the souls of the dead – this forms the central crux of your explorations throughout the world.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SUMMON THE COURAGE: There are no Summons in the main gameplay of *Lightning Returns* – being a beloved trope for the series, you'd think Square Enix could have at least dropped Odin back in…

The structures of *XIII* and *XIII-2* were criticised for different reasons; *XIII* felt like it held your hand too firmly along the horizontal X-axis until right at the end of the game (where your freedom was still limited to a less impressive version of *X*'s Calm Lands). *XIII-2* took you up the Y-axis, requiring you to venture back and forth through different areas of time to achieve your goal. *Lightning Returns*, then, travels the Z-axis – an uncertain and diagonal route through an open world that, while lacking in personality, is flush with gorgeous level design. *Lightning Returns*' place in overall *Final Fantasy* trope-dom may be questionable, but as far as its world goes… it just screams *FF* at you.

LIGHTNING RETURNS IS A GAME THAT SEEMS DEVOID OF IDENTITY, FIGHTING TO WRANGLE A PLACE BETWEEN XIII AND XIII-2



DETAILS

FORMAT: PS3
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Square Enix
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: 14 Feb (Japan: Out now)
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Below: The voice acting in the game is consistent; all performances are believable and unique (something that can't often be said of JRPGs).



Above: Recognisable enemies from Fabula Nova Crystallis lore make a return in the game, alongside some new enemy designs that are actually quite inspired.



Left: There's a lot of focus on strategy and active abilities. Countering, switching costumes on the fly and fluid strategies are all necessary to win.

CLOCKING OUT

Initially irritating, but becoming more intriguing as it goes on, is the ever-present Doomsday clock that sits in the top right of the screen. This counter decreases in real time (one real hour = one in-game day) as you navigate the overworld. It's a fascinating implementation in a JRPG; the clock dictates the pace at which you play the game, much like the falling moon did in The *Legend Of Zelda: Majora's Mask*. It laces the game with an edge of urgency – something often found lacking in this genre – and once you get used to it, the timer makes a fine addition to a game that desperately needs *something* to pad out the safe, vanilla sidequests that litter the main gameplay experience.



TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

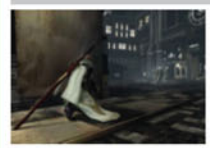
THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

45 MINS



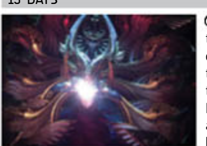
After a great prologue, the first exposition dump is taken on you from a great height – strap yourself in, this will be your next 60 minutes. It wouldn't be so bad if Hope wasn't such a hateable character.

15 HOURS



You're used to the battle system, the customisation system and the timer by now – all that remains is quest-grinding and counting down to 6am, when you have to face Hope again…

13 DAYS



This could well be the end of the world – it depends on how many times you've 'completed' the game by now. Finish it on Super Hard and something special happens, apparently.

These environments form the basis for fetch quest missions that serve to send you out across the sprawling overworld. While the missions themselves are often uninspiring, we can't help but respect the way they utilise the environment. The back and forth through the game's various regions keeps the pacing fresh – you're never in one place long enough for it to stagnate.

Levelling isn't achieved via battling, but rather by completing these myriad quests (which tend to require battling anyway; harvesting items from your dispatched opponents). What the game lacks in any sort of consistent narrative cohesion, it makes up for in gameplay structure. The whole world is going to end in six days, and by opting to complete quests, Lightning can absorb souls and extend the world's lifespan up to 13 (doing so enables you to tie up all the loose ends on the planet, seemingly). This is an interesting gameplay conceit, and it gives the game an edge of tension – running from battles, losing a fight or just wandering aimlessly will cost you *real* time, and that will have a negative impact on your ending.

We're pretty certain that, on the Medium difficulty (Hard is locked until you finish the game once), you can't actually complete the game, per se, on your first run through. In fact, most of the game proper is locked out until you choose to start a New Game+. If you do this after running out of days, all your items, upgrades, gil and quest progression will import; if you start again after beating the final boss you have the Hard difficulty option. This forced take on a New Game+ is an interesting mechanic because areas you may not have already unlocked are open to you from the beginning of the game, and you can come across NPCs or get given quests that would otherwise be unavailable to you.

While this does imbue the game with a longevity and lifespan that you wouldn't

A CAST OF ONE

Unlike previous entries in the series, Lightning is the only playable character for the entirety of the game – this is very much her story. A few NPCs pop in to ally themselves with you in battle from time to time, and you'll suffer some cameos from the cast of the last two games (Hope is your guide through the game, and he's just as irritating and weak a character as he always has been). Lightning still feels a little underdeveloped as a central character, but her presence here is safe, if nothing else; she's identifiable enough to carry this game on her own, and we're glad to see her finally take centre stage.

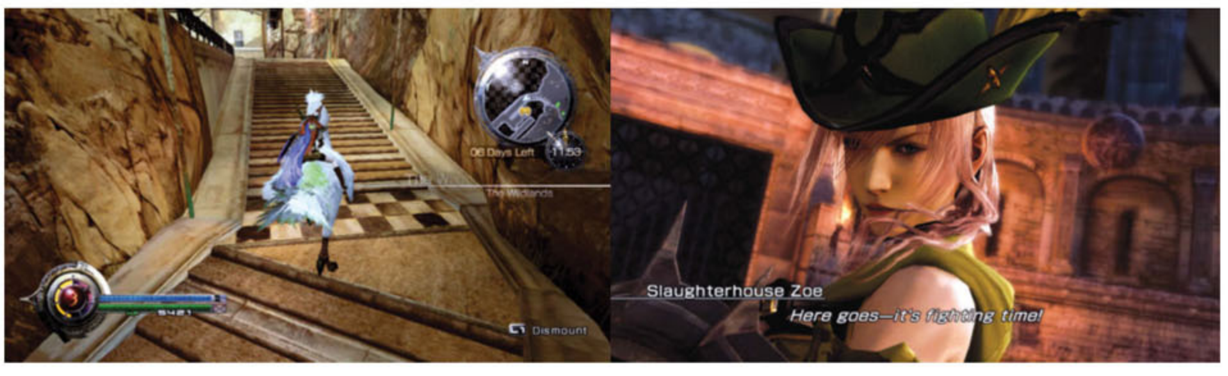
Below: You may find yourself settling into a certain set of costumes – this is all well and good, but when you come up against an enemy immune to your triad of setups, things get real ugly, real quick.



Left: This is real *Final Fantasy*. Look at that sword. Look at it. It's ridiculous. You don't want to be on the receiving end of that.

Right: When you start dishing out damage in the thousands, you really start to feel the wrath Lightning is capable of.





Left: This is just another example of some of the awful dialogue you'll be subjected to if you choose to pay any attention to the story.

Above: Chocobos are rideable (and upgradeable) in the game – therefore it's impossible not to like.

necessarily get in other, more story-based RPGs, it limits the game to a hardcore following – the devoted RPG players of the world. This is quite an inaccessible game to those interested in a more casual experience, but it's refreshing for the niche-hunting RPG fans. A typical playthrough will take you 30 hours. To unlock the bonus Hard Mode dungeon, finish off the final boss, complete 100+ quests and make it to the optional super-boss that lies in wait at the end of the secret dungeon, you'll easily have to accumulate 60+ hours of total play time.

Most of that time will be spent in the customisation mode, too. This is not a bad thing *at all* – it's in these menus that the game is most reminiscent of old-school RPGs. Racking your brain to equip abilities and items that proffer the best stats is as engaging as it is rewarding. Kitting out Lightning in her myriad costumes, playing with different ability typesets, equipping various swords and shields… it gives the game a toybox feel that, oddly enough, suits the world and tone of *Lightning Returns* all too well. We spent a decent number of hours making our preferred classes (Black Mage, Red Mage, Dragoon) as reminiscent as possible of their classic *FF* roots.

These cosmetic changes apply in a very functional way in battle, too – each equipped ability corresponds to a face button, with some classes (or Garbs, as the game likes to call them) coming with locked abilities. Striking the right balance between stat boosts that the abilities offer and practical battle use is one of the most compelling aspects of *Lightning Returns* – something we really weren't expecting. The way the game dictates battle dynamics for some encounters (Staggering makes a return here, and your option to 'Overclock' Lightning helps speed this process up) is inspired – if we cared a little more about the story driving these battles, they would have been some of the most atmospheric and tense of any recent *Final Fantasy* release. However, with the added tension of the world's timer hanging over your head, certain story-related battles still feel pretty tense, and you'll end up clenching your toes and gripping your pad hard when your health starts to drop.

Graphically, the game operates on two polar opposites – the CG is jaw-dropping, reminiscent of the Agni's Philosophy tech demo for the Crystal Engine's Luminous upgrade. Alas, in-game there is some horrific texture pop-in, frame-rate slowdown (unforgivable when you want to see the screen busy with magic and monsters), and most textures are appalling up close. NPCs are bland and characterless for the most part, and their bumbling around the various locales would be funny if it wasn't so embarrassing.

Lightning Returns has some genuinely great ideas as far as modern RPGs are concerned, and despite being let down by a shoddy story and some graphical issues, it remains a shining example of how dynamic battle systems and thoughtful character customisation can save an otherwise trite, lifeless game. If you're after an RPG that tests the waters of something new, then *Lightning Returns* is for you. If you're after an engaging, thoughtful story, you're better off looking elsewhere.

RACKING YOUR BRAIN TO EQUIP ABILITIES AND ITEMS THAT PROFFER THE BEST STATS IS AS ENGAGING AS IT IS REWARDING

FAQs

Q. DOES IT PLAY LIKE A TYPICAL FINAL FANTASY GAME?
Yes and no – systems are in place that tap into the deep RPG roots of the series, but mostly it's an action-RPG. Sorry.

Q. DOES IT MAKE SENSE?
If you can put up with Hope's bloated exposition dumps, we're sure there's a story in there somewhere. We tuned him out, though.

Q. IS IT PRETTY?
The CG is spectacular, but the main game feels like it's been released four years too late. Light's hair is nice, though.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

WALKIN' WARDROBE: Lightning's extensive wardrobe offers something for the completionists – getting all her outfits will take you a fair few playthroughs, with more options becoming available once you reach Hard mode.

VERDICT 7/10

FRESH IDEAS IN A SLIGHTLY LACKLUSTRE FINAL PRODUCT

CAN TELLTALE DO IT AGAIN?

The Walking Dead: Season Two – Episode 1

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS3, 360, iOS
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Telltale
DEVELOPER: Telltale
PRICE: £4 PS3, 360. £2.99 iOS. £19 season pass PC
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 2 GHz CPU, 3GB RAM, 512MB GPU, 2GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

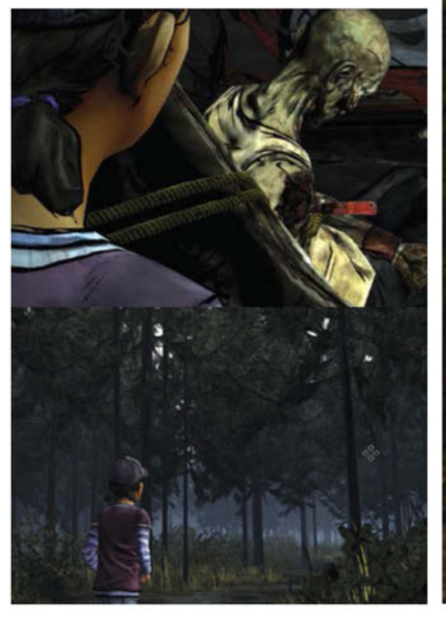
Below: Telltale's engine is strange. It doesn't seem like it requires much processing power, and a mid-range PC can run it as easily as Windows, but it stutters and spits on the last-gen consoles.

There's a curious sense of ennui surrounding *The Walking Dead: Season 2.* It's a peculiar case given how sequel-happy gamers usually are, but the relative lack of fanfare around the follow-up to 2012's Game Of The Year is palpable. Perhaps it's the fact that even entering that world again feels like setting yourself up for an ordeal, such was the intensity (and completeness) of the first season. Can anyone really face that again? Or maybe it's the fact that the core writing duo behind most of the first season's finest moments, Jake Rodkin and Sean Vanaman, have left Telltale to start new studio Campo Santo. Can this world be trusted in the hands of others?

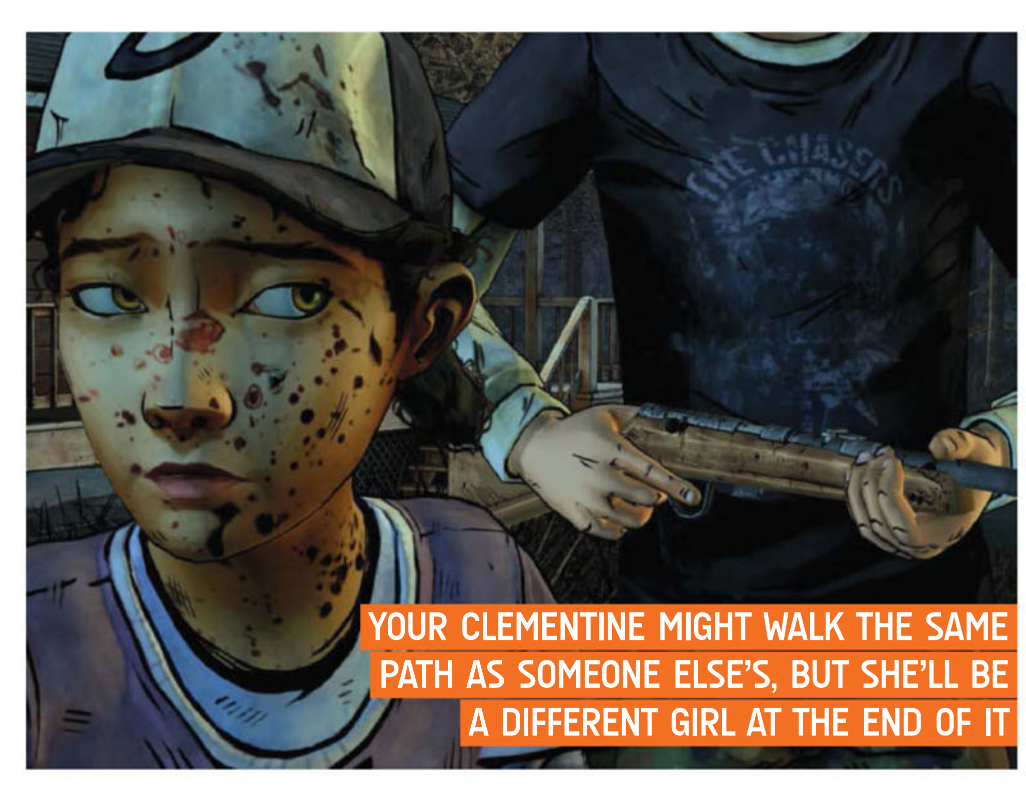
Let's answer that question straight away, then. Yes. *All That Remains*, the first episode of a new five-part season, stands comfortably with any of its predecessors; combining world-class writing and dialogue with stump-gnawing tension and compelling (if not exactly technical) action. More of the same it may be, but when the same is this good, that's hardly a problem. You now play as Clementine, for reasons that will be very well known to those who finished the first season. After a brief introductory sequence involving a couple of recognisable faces, the story moves forward 16 months and a slightly older, definitely wiser Clem finds herself alone and in desperate need of the type of company that still has all its skin.

Interacting with the world is largely identical to the first season. You can move around confined environments and interact with specific props and characters, using either the mouse or both sticks on a controller. Far more interesting, of course, is what happens during those interactions. Telltale's engine is context-sensitive, awarding what's on screen far more gravity than your own dexterity with a controller.

Below: Interestingly, it's another Idle Thumbs alum, Nick Breckon, who takes over from Rodkin and Vanaman on co-writing duties here.



Below: Choices made in the first season carry over, but it feels like they won't have a huge impact. If you're new to the game or have moved platform, Telltale randomises your choices.



YOUR CLEMENTINE MIGHT WALK THE SAME PATH AS SOMEONE ELSE'S, BUT SHE'LL BE A DIFFERENT GIRL AT THE END OF IT



Above: Zombies are an ever-present threat, yet Telltale manages to just about make you forget they exist and then hurls them back in your face. As ever, this is really a story about people.

TELLING STORIES

Telltale Games has always been a prolific studio and has had plenty of heavy licences to toy with in its time, including *Back To The Future* and *Jurassic Park*, but the success of *The Walking Dead* has propelled the San Franciscan studio into the mainstream. As well as the already excellent *The Wolf Among Us* and Season 2 of *TWD*, the studio is working on games based on *Borderlands* and *Game Of Thrones*. Presumably, these will follow the studio's now-familiar template of choice-driven storytelling with light action and even lighter puzzling, rather than reverting to the LucasArts-style traditional point-and-click. Probably for the best, given *The Walking Dead*'s enormous recent success.

Discussing a *Walking Dead* episode without divulging the story is pretty tricky, as so much of the pleasure of these games comes from the shock of not knowing what's coming next. Still, an early scene with a dog is an instant winner; mixing basic environmental puzzling with choice and consequence in a way that enhances your own understanding of Clementine, the situation she's in, and the urgency of what you need to do to survive. The fact Telltale makes you not only care for a protagonist, but actively stress about her wellbeing, is masterful. Remember there are no traditional videogame crutches here – no health bars, no permadeath – so the tension comes purely from the writing and direction. Yet you still mostly feel like you're in control, that it's you directing the story rather than the other way around. It's a masterful piece of deception, and it works brilliantly.

There are some people who enjoy picking holes in these games, finding the joins or the scenes that would play out regardless of your input. All those people are doing, though, is spoiling it for themselves. This is a game to be played on instinct; a world of reactions. Your Clementine might walk the same path as someone else's, but she'll be a different girl at the end of it. And we really should talk about Clementine. A brilliantly written character by the end of the first season, and now a masterfully-written one. Her dialogue choices are so skilfully drawn; retaining a sense of fragility and fear, but absolutely understanding that she is no ordinary little girl. She's seen way too much for that.

Given the relative lack of interesting or cleverly-drawn female protagonists in games, Clementine instantly stands out and even over the course of a single two-hour episode proves a beguiling and fierce lead, more than capable of carrying the game as a strong character with a lot of potential depth. Some may have baulked at the fact that *Season 2* didn't entirely transpose the story to a new set of characters, but it's now easy to see why Telltale stuck with Clementine.

It's not a perfect episode. A later section that sees you moving around a house is hampered by a lack of choice and some very obvious invisible walls which don't do much for your suspension of disbelief. One particularly gruesome scene feels a little overly nasty, too. That being said, much like the first season, this episode earns its shocks and squeals through prominent foreshadowing and careful, diligent scripting. Compare it to the TV series, which seems hellbent on putting horrendous scenes in front of you just with no narrative justification whatsoever, and it's not hard to see which version of this world is superior.

And talking of superior versions, once again the PC reigns supreme. The stuttering and freezing issues that have always plagued the console versions are entirely absent from the Steam game, and the game looks gorgeous at a crisp 1080p – its expressive faces and soft colours doing wonders to mask a presumably modest budget. What more can be said? The benchmark narrative game of the last generation has come back just as strong and just as skilfully as before. You should already be playing it.

FAQs

Q. WHO DO YOU PLAY AS?
Clementine, but 16 months older. She's still very much a little girl, but a tough one.

Q. BETTER THAN SEASON ONE?
As good as, easily. It's as strong an episode as you could ask for.

Q. ANY NEW SYSTEMS?
No, frankly. There's a slightly smoother QTE system and the cursor looks different, but this is the same tech.

BETTER THAN

TWD: SURVIVAL INSTINCT



AS GOOD AS



TWD SEASON 1

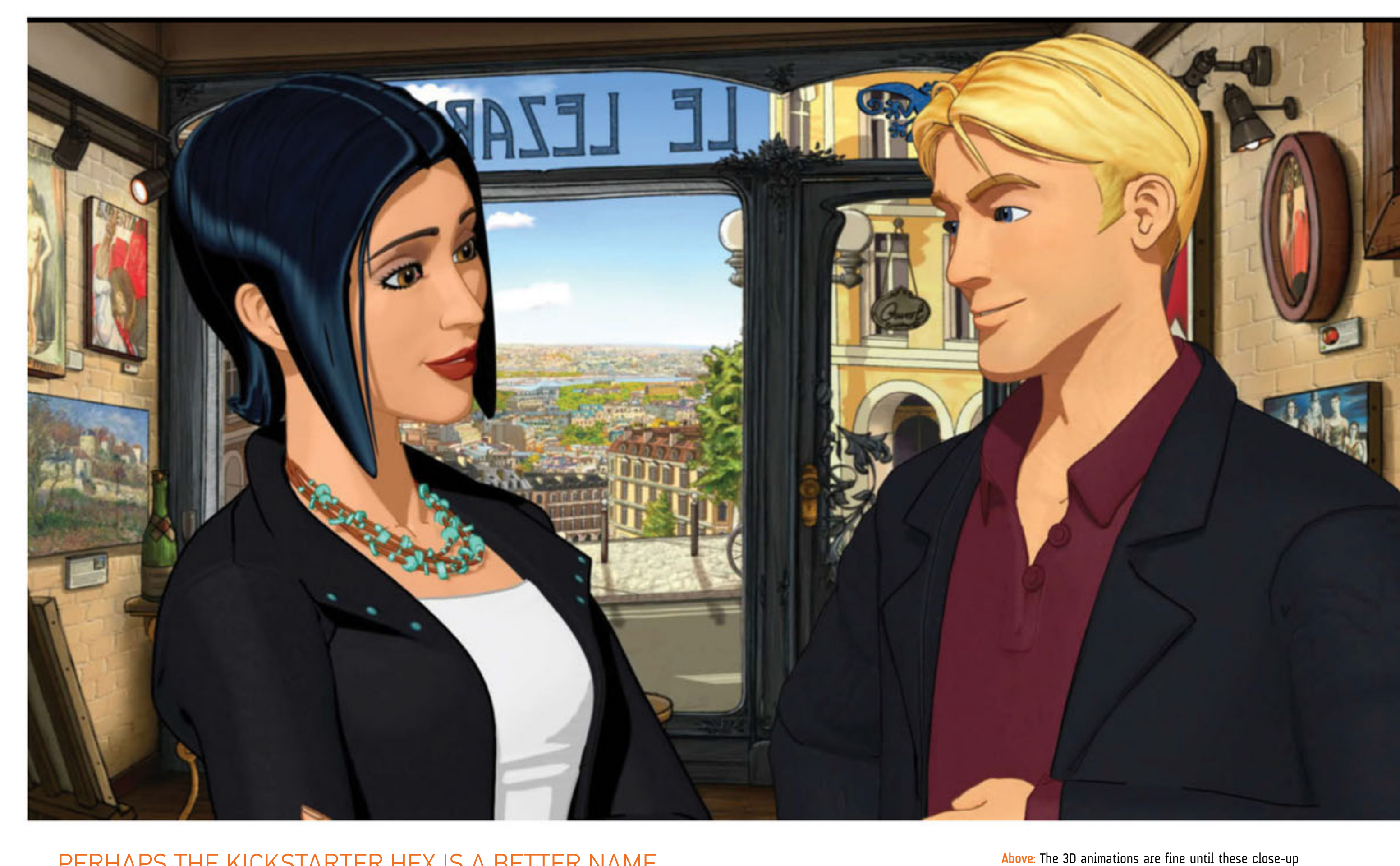
FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

DEAD GOOD: Telltale's writers have an understanding of fiction and form that most other game developers just do not. The dialogue is masterful and the story absolutely compelling.



A RIVETING CONTINUATION OF TELLTALE'S SAGA



Above: The 3D animations are fine until these close-up conversations. It's nice that we get to see a little more of the interaction between characters, but it only highlights how shonky the lip-syncing and animation is.

PERHAPS THE KICKSTARTER HEX IS A BETTER NAME

Broken Sword 5: The Serpent's Curse – Part 1

It's funny, really, the effect that Kickstarter has had on the games industry. Beyond the importance of elements such as crowdfunding and the developer/fan community symbiosis, what is really interesting is how games like *Broken Sword 5: The Serpent's Curse* can thrive. This is an archaic genre for an archaic group of gamers, but where most games would be criticised for failing to innovate too much, somehow it's enough when a Kickstarter game remains unflinching in its old-school design. Therein lies the double-edged sword of *Broken Sword 5*; yes it *is* old in the way it is played, but for many – especially for those that threw money at its Kickstarter campaign – this is exactly what it needed to be. It's a confusing, awkward situation to be in, but Revolution Software has – to its credit – stuck to its goals. It wanted to make a classic *Broken Sword* game, and it absolutely, completely has.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
OTHER FORMATS: PS Vita, Android, iOS
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Revolution Software
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £19 PC, £16 Vita
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.6 GHz CPU, 1GB RAM, 256MB GPU, 3GB HDD space
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

And when talking of 'classic' point-and-click, it's hard not to recall the 2D glory-scapes of yore – among which the original *Broken Sword* remains a stellar example. Utilising unique 3D-but-not-really technology, *The Serpent's Curse* brings George Stobbart, Nico Collard and series-staple Paris into the HD era. And frankly, it is nothing short of gorgeous. Some serious effort has gone into maintaining that classic 2D feel for the series and ensuring it never really feels like *Broken Sword* has been dragged kicking and screaming into the modern age. It's a subtle but clever means of giving players exactly what they want without putting off those that might be new to the series. Thanks to the 3D approach to character design, conversations can be focused on up close without splitting any pixels – crisp, clear visuals throughout. Facial animations are admittedly a little wooden, but that's largely forgivable when the writing is as exceptional as it is. It is here that *Broken Sword 5* really relives its roots, in fact, with the typically larger-than-life characters you'd expect to meet in these

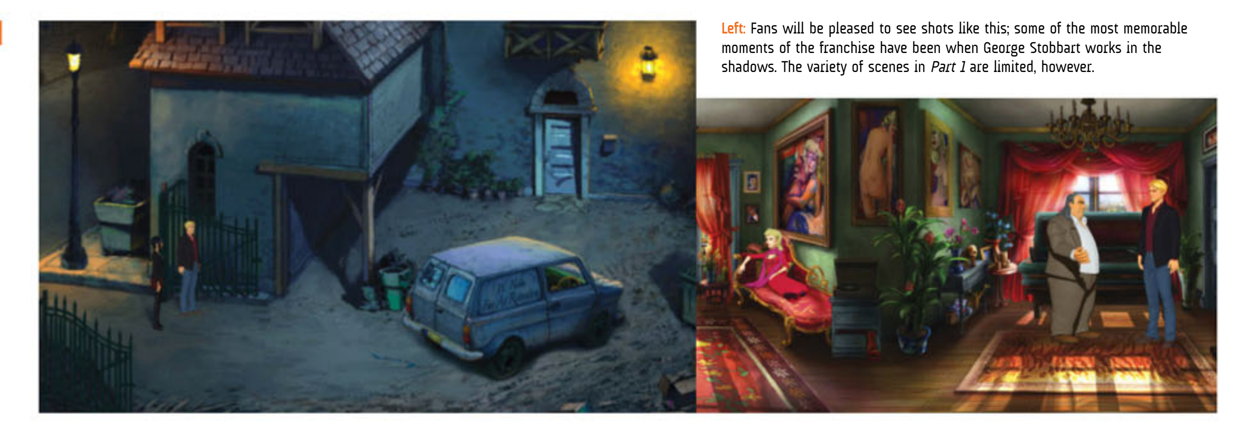
THIS IS MORE OF A TEASER; A TASTE OF THINGS TO COME RATHER THAN THE FULLY-FLEDGED GLOBE-TROTTING ADVENTURE WE HAD HOPED FOR

FAQs

Q. VOICE ACTING?
There are some duds in there, but for the most part this is a fantastic bunch applied to a great script.

Q. HOW'S STOBBART?
Rolf Saxon, the original voice of George Stobbart, does return and pulls off his cheesy quips as exceptionally as ever.

Q. AND NICO COLLARD?
Sadly the role hasn't been reprised by Hazel Ellerby, but the replacement does a good job of keeping up.



Left: Fans will be pleased to see shots like this; some of the most memorable moments of the franchise have been when George Stobbart works in the shadows. The variety of scenes in *Part 1* are limited, however.



Below: Returning to Paris in *Broken Sword* is a smart move, tickling that sense of nostalgia that series' fans will be really clamouring for.



outstandingly crafted Parisian scenes. It's twee, for sure, but as George becomes embroiled in unravelling a mysterious – and ultimately sinister – murder it's obvious that *Broken Sword* is back. Fans need not worry, jump in and get involved. You'll love it.

Despite that, however, it's hard to ignore the most blatant criticism of *Broken Sword 5*: it is a game of two halves. As a result this is more of a teaser, a taste of things to come rather than the fully-fledged globe-trotting adventure we had hoped for. Being split into two parts has only restricted *Broken Sword 5*, which is an unnecessary fault to have when *Part 2* is sure to follow so closely behind. While it's swell returning to colourful Paris and re-meeting fan favourites from across the series, it is noticeable that the game is lessened by its pace. There's an extended introduction to play through here that – in a larger, complete game – would not feel unnecessary, but as the curtain draws on *Part 1* you're left with an empty, wanting feeling. Part of that is due to its quality – you will want more of it – but mostly it's down to the almost arbitrary cliffhanger placed as your handful of hours are done with *Broken Sword 5*'s first part.

It doesn't feel like a natural end to an episode as you might expect from a TV show or a Telltale game; instead it feels as though it was a game severed in half to be ready for a specified release date rather than waiting only a month or two for the final form to be released. It wouldn't be so bad if *Part 1* ended with more of a satisfying conclusion, and though one particular story arc is finalised, the real crux of the game is introduced – and to end on such a tease only heightens the unnecessary nature of the divide this game presents itself in.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

WORK OF ART: The 2D backdrops – and even the impressive 3D-cum-2D models – all make the latest entry in the series its most aesthetically pleasing one yet.

Thankfully there is enough of a reason to reach that end, and not just for the promise of George and Nico finding themselves in precarious – and sometimes romantic – situations. In terms of puzzles, *Broken Sword 5* does nothing to shake up the tried-and-tested formula. In that sense, it should be criticised, but somehow it manages to tread that line enough to be forgiven. It still suffers from the curse many point-and-click adventure games are pained by: that endless need to click absolutely everything.

Mercifully, you can't leave an area now until you've acquired everything that might be of use to you in the future, and while that might sound like sacrilege to globetrotting *Broken Sword* diehards, it does manage to maintain a sense of cohesion. But the puzzles themselves, while fulfilling, are hardly challenging. You'll still find yourself trying to staple one obscure item with another should the solution escape you, but by and large you'll have no issues solving the challenges posed across *Part 1*.

Maybe this is simply due to the game's nature as a fluffer, a warm-up for the main event that hadn't been balanced with that in mind. Every puzzle game needs to space its difficulty over a marathon not a hurdle race and *Broken Sword 5* is perhaps no different. But then that's the point, we just don't know yet. Nostalgia plays a huge part in whether or not *Broken Sword 5* should be deemed a success, so it's perhaps best to look at it from that angle before diving straight into *The Serpent's Curse*. Good quality writing and voice acting help things along, but this is a game best experienced as a whole and does nothing to claim any but the most enthusiastic of point-and-click experts.

VERDICT 7/10
A GAME WITH CAVEATS FOR ALL BUT THE DIEHARD

GIVE US A CLUE

The hint system included in *Broken Sword 5: The Serpent's Curse* isn't particularly new – the iPad remakes of the originals featured a similar setup. For spotting hidden items you might need it can be a lifesaver, but there seems to be no consistency to the hints when actually deciphering a puzzle. The initial tips are always fairly ambiguous, but if that's not enough the later ones will practically solve the riddle for you. It's kind of dismissive of the term 'hint' and a little easy to rely on, so you'll need a bit of willpower if you want to enjoy the game at its best.

BETTER THAN — THE CAVE



WORSE THAN — MACHINARIUM

ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACK

Peggle 2

Normally the rallying cry for any videogame sequel is that it has to be different, fresh, innovative or ambitious. Something that pushes the original formula in a new direction, enough to feel fresh and relevant. Yet that never seemed to be the case with those clamouring for more *Peggle*. The peg-clearing puzzle game was such a breath of fresh air that really, all the sequel would have had to have been was more of the same and fans would likely have been happy. Yet, bizarrely, *Peggle 2* fails to satisfy even that basic criterion.

The gameplay has returned untouched from the original outing and it's still strangely compulsive. Inspired by pachinko, you have to fire a small metal ball so it pings against orange pegs. Clear them all and you clear the level. In your way are blue pegs, moving pegs, obstacles and your own desire to crack high scores, which is achieved by scoring points bonuses (like bouncing the ball off a wall before pinging an orange peg, for example).

Although you have to aim your initial shot, it's the unpredictability of what happens when the ball starts to ping around that holds your interest and eventually leads to you planning where the ball will bounce. There's an element of luck once the ball is in play that isn't entirely different to the same formula that's powered *Angry Birds* into mainstream culture. Because there's a random element to the gameplay, a beginner can accidentally stumble upon a winning shot that hits lots of pegs and trigger *Peggle 2*'s cache of fireworks, numbers pinging across the screen and 'Game Clip Recorded' notifications that all pat you on the back for a job well done.

But alas, the one thing you won't be doing is beating the scores of others, because there aren't any leaderboards. In one of the biggest and oddest oversights in *Peggle 2*, there aren't leaderboards of any form, so one of the biggest elements of the original has been dropped. There's no obvious substitute for leaderboards either. There are optional objectives now, adding incentive to return and perfect each level (particularly as they're tied into Achievements). There are specifically-crafted trials, testing every element of your *Peggle* skillset with different shots and demands. But there's nothing that helps replicate that thrill of competition in beating the scores of friends – such a big part of the original's appeal.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox 360
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: PopCap
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (1-2 Online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes



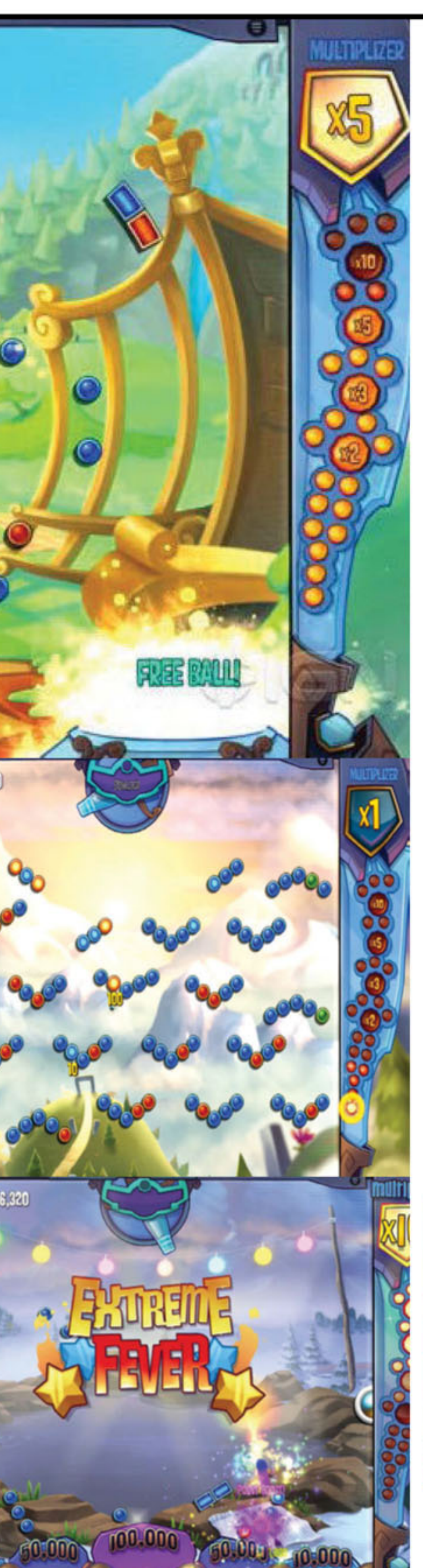


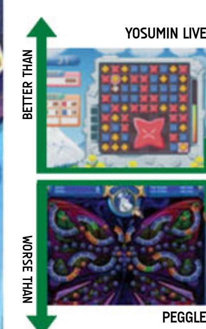
Above: Bjorn is the only returning character and his special skill of showing where the ball will bounce has been left untouched. Right: There's a puzzle-like element to each stage, as you have to work out the best order of attack.



GAME CLIP RECORDED

One of the most annoying features of *Peggle 2* is the constant 'Game Clip Recorded' notifications, triggered at any shot that sees you racking up a high score or clanging into a lot of pegs. It initially serves as a cute way to pat you on the back but it highlights a problem with the system: there's no way to manually set what triggers the automatic recording as it works to an algorithm. What seems like perfect recording material to the Xbox One often isn't nearly as pleasing or exciting to the human eye. Hence one game session of *Peggle 2* leaves you with a mountain of clips to sift through and organise. Frustrating.





The closer you look, the more you see that's missing. There are fewer *Peggle* Masters than the original, which means there are fewer special moves to experiment with. There are also fewer levels to clear, which becomes a problem when those who have any *Peggle* experience will rattle through the first half of levels with ease, and even after that the difficulty in *Peggle 2* never quite scales up in the same way that it did for its predecessor.

There are also further problems that irritate. *Peggle 2* is overzealous when it comes to recording clips, more so than any other Xbox One title to date. Play a few games and your hard drive will be littered with short videos of various *Peggle 2* shots, the vast majority of them barely worth viewing again, let alone recording and keeping forever. There's also slowdown in some of the later stages. The nature of the gameplay means that slowdown never really impedes nor intrudes but it remains baffling how a game like *Peggle 2* can have any slowdown on next-generation hardware.

But the biggest problem here is the complete lack of local multiplayer. PopCap has promised that local multiplayer will be added in a free update, but its absence simply fuels any cynicism you might be feeling about *Peggle 2* and how it feels like it may have been rushed out the door to hit Xbox One's launch window. It's bizarre, but at times it often feels like this is the original and *Peggle* is the sequel, so long is the list of omissions and problems that plague this second outing.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TOUGH GUY: The only obvious change to the gameplay is the addition of 'armoured' blocks, which need two hits to break (unless hit with a Peggle Master power). They don't really add anything though, besides being another obstacle to deal with.

That *Peggle 2* overcomes these problems is testament to just how good the core gameplay is and how easy it is to pick up and play. There are no complex mechanics to trip you up and there's no real steep learning curve involved, and yet that doesn't stop *Peggle 2* from being a game that draws you back for more as you grow with confidence learning each level inside out. Although 'casual' gaming has become something of a dirty phrase over the years, *Peggle* should serve as the template for what the genre should be about – accessible, simple and easy to understand for those who might have never picked up a pad before.

FOR ALL THE STEPS BACKWARD, IT'S THE NEW FEELING OF CYNICISM THAT PEGGLE 2 INSPIRES WHICH IS PERHAPS ITS BIGGEST FLAW

It's also worth noting that those who never played *Peggle* will find little to complain about here, as the slimmer content, absence of leaderboards and lack of local multiplayer will only really grate with *Peggle* veterans. *Peggle 2* is a game that's bursting with bright personality and character, and there's still little else in gaming that can match the triumph of *Ode To Joy* and explosions of rainbows upon completing a level.

Yet there's no denying this is a missed opportunity and one that feels like its flaws may have arisen due to PopCap perhaps rushing it onto Xbox One's storefront rather than anything else. For all the steps backward, it's the new feeling of cynicism that *Peggle 2* inspires which is perhaps its biggest flaw. A missed opportunity and a real shame.

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE TO COMPLETE?
Around four hours – although you can double that if you want to go back and do the optional objectives and trials.

Q. WHAT'S ONLINE MULTIPLAYER LIKE?
Good fun but everyone uses Gnorman and there's no punishment for rage-quitting, which is a shame.

Q. NO LOCAL MULTIPLAYER?
None. At all. It's back to the good old pass-the-pad-for-single-player-levels method if you have friends round and want to play.



Above: The new faces in *Peggle 2* are more balanced than the original outing - there's no Master Hu-inspired hatred this time round. **Left:** Clearing the stage triggers real feelings of triumph thanks to the music, fireworks and rainbows that assault the senses.

VERDICT 6/10
FEELS LIKE THE ORIGINAL RATHER THAN THE SEQUEL

A TOUCHSCREEN ORWELLIAN NIGHTMARE

République: Episode 1

République, a Kickstarter-funded stealth title, is something of an anomaly. Rather than being an out-and-out mobile game, it transcends the platform and resembles something far more forward thinking than is usually available on handheld devices.

Camouflaj and Logan have managed to create a mobile game with a mobile price point that ticks a lot of the boxes that big-budget console leviathans fail to on a daily basis. It's ambitious, conceptual, precise and – crucially – works properly. We are subjected to sub-standard touch controls in iOS games more often than we'd like, and so *République* finds itself in a strong position. To finally be offered something that gets all of its fundamentals right without trying to peddle a steaming pile of microtransactions and contrived social features is refreshing.

And what's even more impressive is that *République*'s features are well executed even when they are so numerous. As well as the neatly engineered touch controls there are several genre influences at work here that tip their proverbial hats to several successful franchises – at times the stealth elements hark back to the early *Metal Gear* days, and there are thematic comparisons to be made with *Deus Ex*.

The game purveys a sterile, Orwellian dystopia in which people are punished for consuming sensitive materials – it's not the most trailblazing narrative at this point, but there are still several episodes to follow that will build upon it.

The key gameplay hook here is that you don't control a player-character – instead you are a disembodied figure that aids Hope, the main character, by taking control of security cameras and unlocking doors for her. You then direct her by touching the screen, allowing you to order her to snap into cover or pepper spray an assailant. Touching an Illuminati-style eye in the top-right pauses the action and puts you into 'OmniView', your main point of call when interacting with *République*'s features.

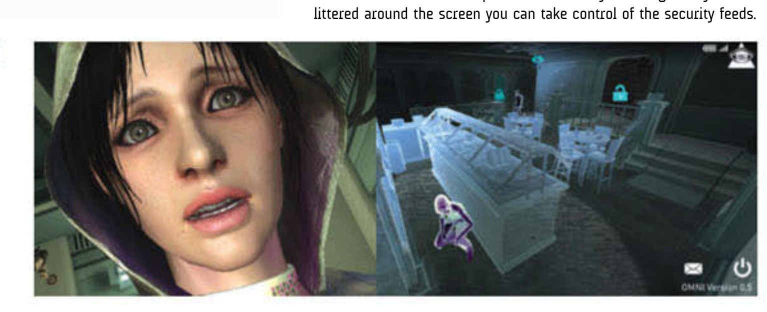
OmniView enables you to pause the action and jump between security feeds. What this does is allow you to plan ahead before directing Hope to move. This is a key dynamic, and provides the game with an almost turn-based strategy focus reminiscent of Mode 7's superb *Frozen Synapse*. It's not particularly tough, but to have to consider every situation carefully before committing Hope to a movement is a great inclusion.

A well-realised stealth adventure, this first instalment is a testament to the experience of its developers, a group of individuals with credits on titles as diverse as *Metal Gear Solid 4, Mass Effect 2* and *F.E.A.R.* This is indie done right; a title that makes the most of its limited resources to create something unique and engaging.

DETAILS

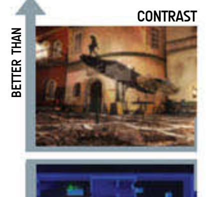
FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Mac
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Camouflaj, Logan
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £2.99 (Season Pass £10.49)
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Below: This is an example of OmniView. By touching the eye icons littered around the screen you can take control of the security feeds.



BETTER THAN

CONTRAST





WORSE THAN

FROZEN SYNAPSE

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

INDIRECT: *République* is unique in terms of player interaction, as you are not in direct control of Hope and instead have to guide her safely through each stage by using security camera feeds.

VERDICT 7/10

STEALTH, STRATEGY & AMBITION UNITE TO GREAT EFFECT



Above: The stealth elements are intuitive and precise, which alleviates many of the usual touchscreen concerns when playing a game like this.



LIVE AND DIE BY THE SWORD

Nidhogg

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Messhof
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £11.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2
MINIMUM SPEC: 1.2GHz Processor, 512MB RAM, 32MB Graphics Card, 175MB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

***Nidhogg* is a strange beast.** Almost impossible to understand unless played, it's a game that prioritises timing, instinct and strategy as two players face off against one another in a deadly sword fight. It sounds simple enough; with minimal inputs on the keyboard – simply adjusting your stance higher and lower with arrow keys alongside move, stab, duck and jump buttons – the onus is not on what you're pressing but pressing it at precisely the right time to gain the upper hand on your opponent.

But the difficulty isn't in explaining the fundamentals, but in conveying how *Nidhogg* is one of the most balanced and compulsive multiplayer experiences in recent memory. The rules are thus: defeat your enemy in combat and dash towards their end of the screen. However, you'll only gain a few metres of ground at a time as opponents reappear a few seconds after death all the way until you reach the victory screen at the end of each stage.

While there is a single-player mode, it's more of a tutorial. An arcade-style gauntlet of colourful AI adversaries, it serves as a decent trial of skill as you spray pixelated blood across each of the four stages. However, in multiplayer (either local – sharing a keyboard – or online) the game transforms completely. What occurs is a tension-filled choreography of balletic moves that rarely breaks for breath. You'll throw your sword, which your enemy will deflect before throwing theirs, you perform a divekick that commences a fistfight, before you both roll backwards to reclaim your blades and start the dance once more. There's a nuance to the combat that galvanises each match, as you edge forward to gain more ground, before being sent reeling back two screens.

But more importantly, it does what all great multiplayer games do in offering a social experience. The type that elicits gasps, cheers and expletives as players bounce across the screen trying to best their adversary. Matches can be over in 30 seconds or they can take place over 30 minutes in a tiring war of attrition.

And while there are a limited number of stages, each contains their own hazards that have to be taken into consideration during battle. A cloud-based arena could have dissolvable platforms, while a level with a conveyer belt can push players towards a pit – each adds another dynamic layer to the game's addictive formula. It's a small package but there's a wealth of value to be found in the creative gameplay that'll spur you through many hours of gaming. A strange beast *Nidhogg* may be, but one that you'll find yourself utterly drawn towards.

WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

MAKE ME A MATCH: Matchmaking in *Nidhogg* is inconsistent and we could only see a couple of people online at a time. However, it recommends playing with friends within the same region.

BETTER THAN: RED STEEL
WORSE THAN: BUSHIDO BLADE



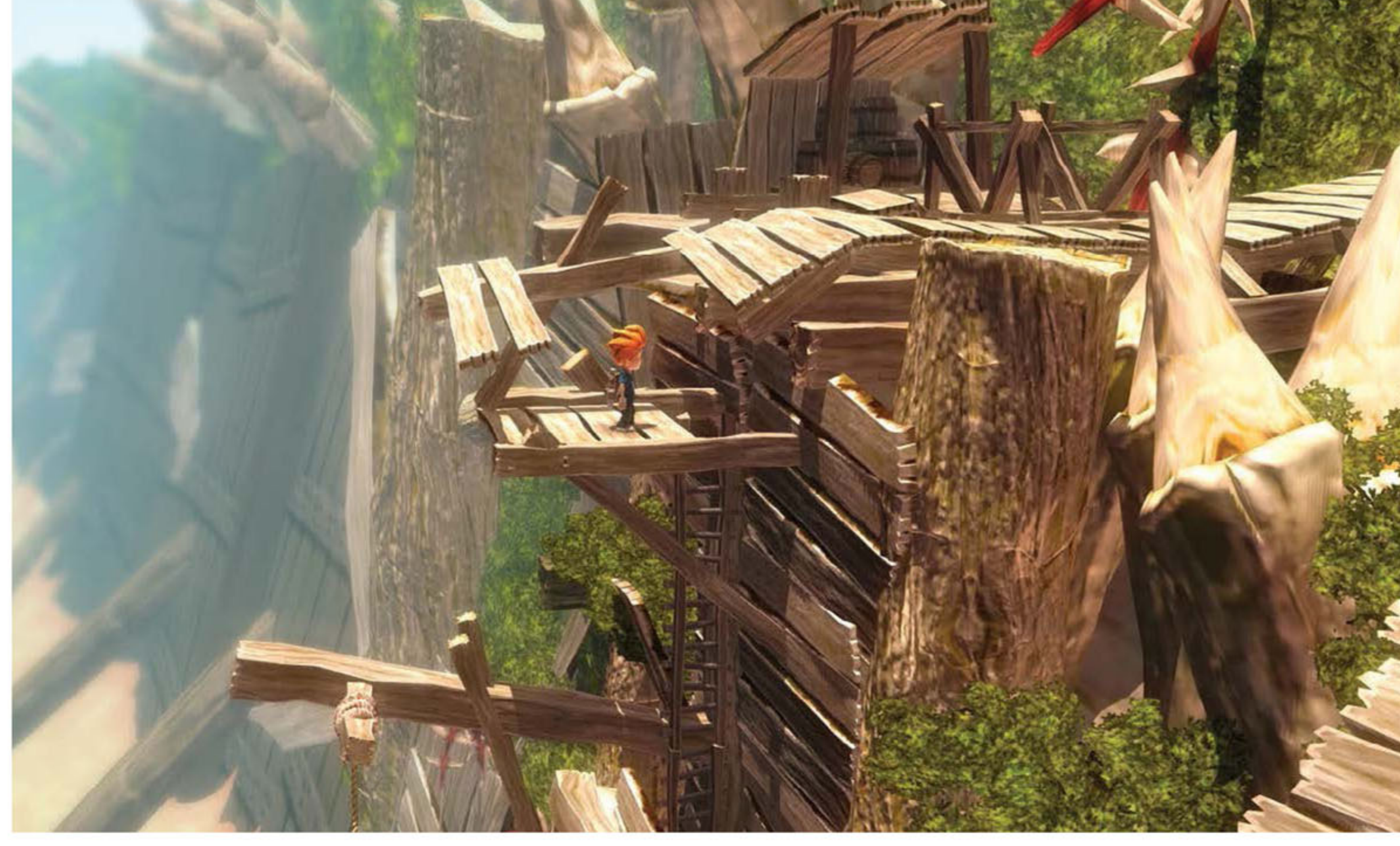
Above: It's clear early on that the best way to play *Nidhogg* is in local multiplayer. Because of the simple range of inputs, players can share one keyboard when competing in epic duels to the death.



Above: The aesthetics are hypnotic and while there's only a scant four stages to choose from, the pixelated scenery evokes classic cinematic duels. There's also something satisfying in turning your enemy into a cloud of multi-coloured pixelated blood.



USE THE POINTY END



A SMART YET TOUGH RE-IMAGINING OF A WIIWARE TITLE

Max: The Curse Of Brotherhood

Remember *Geometry Wars*? It seems like a different era now but that fizzy shoot-'em-up was one of the most important titles for the Xbox 360's launch. Not just because it provided a real spark of quality at a time when the Xbox 360 didn't have any truly standout titles (unfortunately we all remember *Perfect Dark Zero* as well) but also because *Geometry Wars* heralded the exciting potential of Xbox Live Arcade when most new owners struggled to look past 'full' retail titles.

Which is perhaps why Xbox One's early digital titles have been intriguing and disappointing in equal measure. Even though we're now fully aware of what digital downloads have to offer, a full launch line-up should have the small titles punching above their weight next to the triple-A blockbusters. PlayStation 4 has *Resogun*. What does Xbox One have? *Peggle 2*, which is very much more of the same; and *Halo: Spartan Assault*, which is too bland to really inspire or engage. Surprisingly, it's *Max: The Curse Of Brotherhood* that comes closest to fulfilling the same role that *Geometry Wars* did all those years ago.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox 360
ORIGIN: Denmark
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Game Studios
DEVELOPER: Press Play
PRICE: £9.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

And we say surprisingly because *The Curse Of Brotherhood* is a 2.5D platformer that's essentially a re-imagining of a WiiWare title that came out in 2010 called *Max & The Magic Marker*. You play as Max, leaping and ducking your way through a hazardous dream world of sorts to try to save your brother, who you accidentally placed in peril by wishing he'd be gone forever only to find your wish has actually come true.

EVEN THOSE BROUGHT UP WITH MORE HARDCORE 2D PLATFORMERS OF THE 8-BIT AND 16-BIT ERA WILL FIND THEIR SKILLS TESTED

It's fairly rudimentary stuff as far as the plot goes but the point is that you're in a hostile environment: there's a huge troll creature chasing you throughout the game and the only method of self-defence you have is a magic marker. This is where the genius of *The Curse Of Brotherhood*'s platforming comes into place. Max must use his magic marker to interact with the environment – pulling mud mounds out of the ground, drawing vines, creating branches and so on. You can only interact with marked areas in specific ways but it never feels restrictive, simply because the way in which you have to combine his powers is rather smart.

For example, you might have to draw a branch in a 'wheel' shape, draw another

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG TO COMPLETE?
Four hours if you're exceptionally good at games; six hours if you're a mere mortal. Perhaps more as the end of the game is exceptionally tricky.

Q. ANY SECRETS?
There are hidden eye-cameras and talisman pieces to find, which are both necessary if you want to unlock all the Achievements.

Q. ANY MULTIPLAYER?
Sadly none, although you can have someone watching you fail at trying to complete the puzzles. That's always good for a bit of a laugh.



Left: The graphics are a huge improvement on the scratchy landscapes of the original WiiWare *Max* game, although the odd obscured platform detracts a little from the charm.

Right: Brothers gonna work it out – with the help of a giant flourescent pen.



Above: Max's magic marker has terrible ink consumption, running out just when you could do with the extra juice. Go figure.



FINDERS KEEPERS

With the main adventure clocking in at roughly six hours, the main reason to revisit *Curse Of Brotherhood* is to seek out its secrets. There are hidden eye-cameras dotted about each level, which you need to uproot and destroy, although most of them are easy to find. What's tougher is finding the hidden talisman pieces, which involve you making the most of Max's powers and using your own ingenuity. Finding all the secrets adds another few hours on top of the total playing time and it does feel like you've got your money's worth once you grab everything on offer.



branch underneath to serve as a ramp, then cut the wheel so it bounces off the ramp towards a pressure pad that you need to hit to clear the path ahead. You can combine this with vines, water spouts, balancing platforms and so on – there's a consistent physics system powering *The Curse Of Brotherhood*, which is what gives Press Play the ability to push the game's puzzles in fiendish and difficult ways.

The same goes for the collision detection, as Max often has to scramble up your hastily-drawn branches to proceed higher, or push cut branches along the ground. Even though you should draw branches in a manner that *Curse Of Brotherhood* understands – sticking to right angles if you want to create stair-shaped branches for Max to climb up, for example – the engine is extremely forgiving and this helps cut down on any frustration. It enables you to focus on the puzzles and getting ahead, rather than having to waste energy fighting against the game engine as you try to get it to recognise what it is you want Max to do.

One of the smartest design decisions made by Press Play is that you don't fight enemies directly. Max has no ways to directly attack the enemies throughout, so instead he has to evade them, often by quickly drawing new paths to get away from danger as they give chase. Again, this helps cut down on any potential frustration. These are examples of some of sections of *The Curse Of Brotherhood* where you have to be quick and draw new paths to save Max's hide, and they also show that the method for moving the marker and drawing isn't always as accurate as you might like. Contained to these small isolated sections, it's not too frustrating. If you had to use the marker to directly fight enemies? That could have dealt a fatal blow to this game's breezy, relaxed pace.

It also gets tough towards the end, so even those who have been brought up with some of the more hardcore 2D platformers of the 8-bit and 16-bit era will find their skills being tested later on, with the final puzzle in particular proving to be a real delight. Press Play deserves a lot of credit here – the puzzles are interesting throughout and serve as the main reason why you would want to push through *Brotherhood* and see everything it has to offer.

There are some small annoyances that detract from the sheer joy of the platforming. Sometimes it's hard to tell where the platforms end, which makes some sections needlessly tricky. Combined with the errant checkpoints, you often end up replaying bigger chunks than you'd like, especially for any difficult sections that are preceded by a short but unskippable cutscene.

But those are minor niggles for a game that's just about long enough and just about smart enough to bump *Max: The Curse Of Brotherhood* to the top of the 'must download' list for Xbox One's digital offerings. It doesn't have the score attack replayability of a *Geometry Wars* or even a *Resogun*, but in terms of sheer enjoyment, we look forward to seeing what game will top it.

FINGERPRINT
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

PHYSICAL GRAFFITI: Max can use his magic marker to draw hills, branches, vines, water spouts or anything else to help him get through the levels. This is what makes *Curse Of Brotherhood* unique and pretty bloody tricky towards the end too.

VERDICT 8/10
THE BEST XBOX ONE DIGITAL DOWNLOAD TITLE THUS FAR



Left: There are a couple of Mario Remixes that transform the Mushroom Kingdom into an endless runner. It's a concept that works effortlessly and makes us wish that Nintendo would just drop its guard and release such a thing on iOS.





Right: Many of the challenges presented in *NES Remix* are directly lifted from remixed games themselves. However, given the constraints of a time limit and a few twists in design, what was once a simple task becomes a fiendish test of skill.

MIXTAPE CIRCA 1985

NES Remix

Nintendo has been trading off nostalgia value with little complaint for close to two decades now. But what this has earned the company is an unparalleled familiarity in the medium, a deep understanding from its audience of both style and function stretched across the majority of its rich lineage. Therefore, *NES Remix* often succeeds by perfectly appropriating this ingrained knowledge into a series of frenzied challenges across a clutch of Nintendo's NES highlights – albeit, given the delayed release in PAL territories, many will be more fondly remembered outside of Europe.

Iconic moments then are given a challenging slant, such as defeating Bowser only with fireballs in *Super Mario Bros.*, or racing against the clock to find a concealed entrance beneath a bush in *The Legend Of Zelda*. These energised snapshots of hallowed properties are reminiscent of Nintendo's glorious parade of micro silliness found across its *WarioWare* titles, and there's parity here in the sense of urgency to every challenge and ultimate compulsion in unlocking everything that the game has to offer that both share.

As you progress you encounter the Remixes, a delightful selection of recognisable 8-bit stages twisted with the eagerness of a bedroom hacker toying with a cherished ROM file. These can take many guises, from *Super Mario Bros.* receiving a complete frosty overhaul (transforming the Mushroom Kingdom into an icy rollercoaster), to franchise characters appearing outside of their native property (Link makes an awkward replacement for Jumpman in *Donkey Kong*). What each has in common is a welcome precision to the scenarios' construction and, fundamentally, a clear love of the era. This is where you'll find some of the most engaging challenges that *NES Remix* has to offer and there are plenty of surprises to be found for those who persevere through the spikes in difficulty.

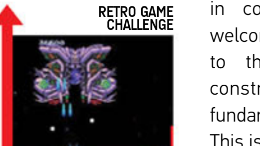
Yet, there are some notable, inexcusable omissions. It might be cynical to assume that *Metroid* and *Super Mario Bros. 3*'s absence is down to a *NES Remix 2* planned further down the line, but when another *Baseball* or *Urban Champion* stage rears its head, you'd be forgiven for lamenting their exclusion.

But more regrettable is the lack of multiplayer. It really is an experience that would've been enlivened by competitive multiplayer, but the solo-only play strips away much of what was intrinsic about many of these arcade ports and NES gems in the first place.

Nevertheless, there's enough good will and thoughtful design to spur players through all 204 challenges therein. It's a shame that overall it's such a mixed bag; a vibrant gumball machine that produces as much giddy excitement as it does tangible disappointment. What you get from it comes down to how much you put in, but for gamers of a certain age it's certainly a worthy investment.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Wii U
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £8.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A




MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

SUPER MARIO BROS: Multiplayer appears to be an oversight to the game's design, considering that many of the NES classics featured included it in some form. Expect it in the inevitable sequel.

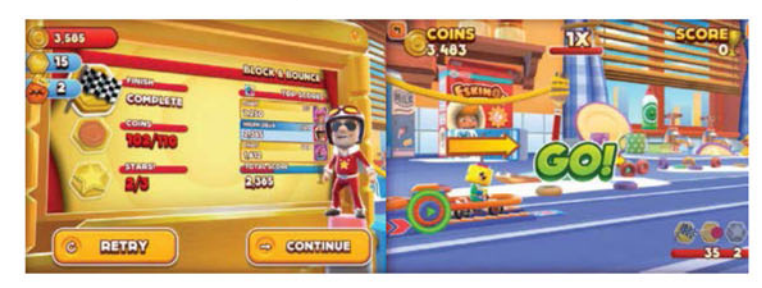


VERDICT 7/10
THE NEEDLE STAYS MOSTLY ON THE TRACK

TO DANGER AND BEYOND

Joe Danger Infinity

Below: The familiar over-the-top sound design makes a return to the mobile iteration. Loud, garish and even intrusive on occasion, there's a real sense of fun here.



It was all meant to be over for Joe. But here we are, a little under a year since he last brought his patented enthusiasm for bone-crushing stunts to mobile devices, and *Joe Danger Infinity* very much builds on the successor of its predecessor. Only this time the eponymous hero isn't just pulling off wheelies and backflips with his trademark motorcycle, but has raided the literal toybox; wind-up planes, cupcakes and ducks all sell the tiny toy motif.

There are clear echoes of Codemasters' *Micro Machines* here. You begin the game navigating through everyday items hazardously strewn across the kitchen counter, only to graduate through the entirety of the household. And while each environment is smartly designed around the novel surroundings and stunt trickery, the sheer pace of the actions and frantic tapping and collecting of coins and items means that all Hello Games' efforts with the backdrop mostly just speed past at a blur.

There's so much going on at the screen at one time that you'll be tapping and swiping all the way to the finish line. Competition is the beating heart of Joe Danger and this mobile iteration has a good case for being the most fiercely competitive entry in the series. It doesn't feature anything as straightforwardly challenging as racing ghost data (one of the console sequel's main enhancements over the original) but it does have all the ingredients for a captivating scoreboard scramble against friends.

But this also leads to a very clear danger that becomes more pronounced as the game progresses. If the idea of paid-for content that offers an in-game advantage leaves you with an uncomfortable feeling in your stomach, then you're not alone. *Infinity* has a range of items, characters and vehicles that require an inordinate in-game price point, urging players to spend real-world currency to gain a clear strategic advantage or an easy out for some of the more complex stages. If it was any more intrusive it would run the risk of revealing a dark underbelly to Joe's perpetual colourful veneer.

But it's easy to leave such qualms in the swirling plumes of smoke left in your path. This is, after all, another thoughtfully crafted series of impressive setpieces, with bonus stages including 100 mile per hour whack-a-mole and endearingly unpredictable challenges, like racing a monkey to the finish line. *Joe Danger Infinity* is a responsive and endlessly playable handheld experience, one brimming with personality and simply joyous across every facet of its design. Hello Games might be leaving the series behind, looking to the skies for its next venture, but in *Infinity*, Joe has gone beyond.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Hello Games
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £1.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

TOY STORY: Instead of a simple port, *Joe Danger Infinity* is built from the ground-up on mobile devices. Stages, challenges and tricks have all been designed with touchscreen play in mind.

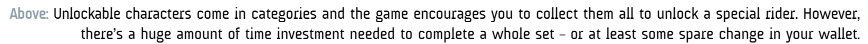
VERDICT 8/10



JOE PUTS ON ANOTHER SPECTACULAR PERFORMANCE

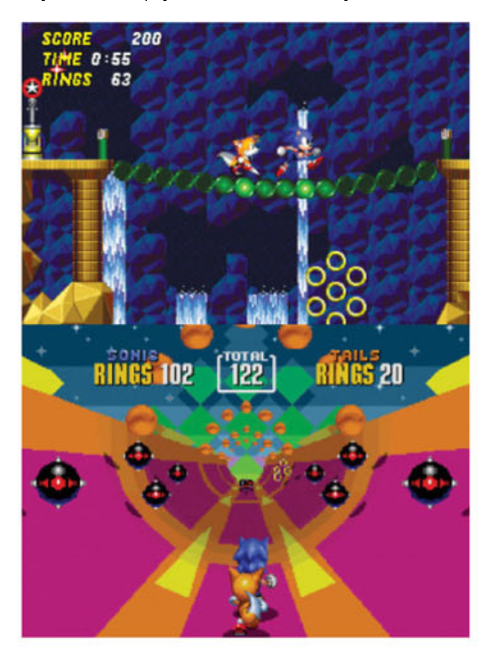


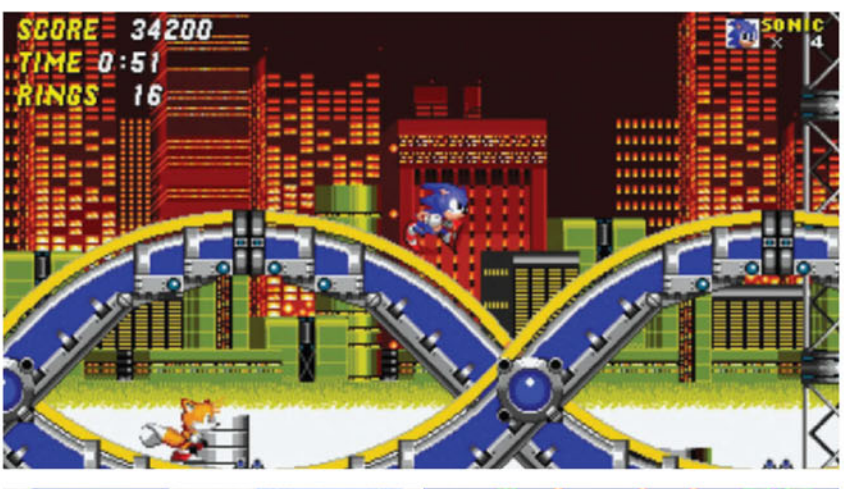




Above: Unlockable characters come in categories and the game encourages you to collect them all to unlock a special rider. However, there's a huge amount of time investment needed to complete a whole set – or at least some spare change in your wallet.

Right: This is our favourite level in the game. Maybe it's the pop-synth soundtrack, maybe it's the level design, maybe it's being able to move so fast the screen can't quite keep up with you… we're not certain why, but we could play Chemical Plant Zone all day.







AN OLD CLASSIC GETS A HANDHELD RENOVATION

Sonic The Hedgehog 2 Remastered

Christian Whitehead's Retro Engine did a stellar job of bringing *Sonic The Hedgehog* to life on mobile devices, and its efforts in porting *Sonic CD* to XBLA and PSN were admirable, too. But we were cautious about *Sonic 2* getting the go-over. Where *Sonic* and *CD* were games that always needed a little tuning up, *Sonic 2* has continually felt very complete. Well, it did until we played this version – it's pretty much the best, most definitive release of the game we've played.

The game itself has always been a benchmark for platforming level design, offering paths for the level-savouring explorers and blistering speed-runners alike. With the remastered version offering controller support and widescreen compatibility, along with a playable Knuckles, the version you can carry around on your phone genuinely feels more complete than versions of the game we've got on Sonic compilations across various other consoles. Our one complaint with the functionality is the on-screen controls – something that plagues most mobile games – but once you get used to the two thumbsticks, it's just a matter of keeping your digits precisely where they need to be.

The game has been ported with due attention to detail and an obvious care for the source material – improvements made in *Sonic 3* and *Sonic & Knuckles* have been retroactively added in. Tails can fly now, and the multiplayer once available only on the Mega Drive returns with added online functionality. We've had a few issues with disconnections and lag in the multiplayer, but nothing too game breaking. Besides, *Sonic 2* was always about the single-player levels anyway.

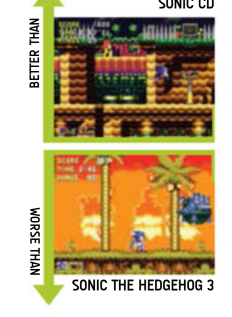
Perhaps the best addition to the game is the Hidden Palace Zone – a level that was dropped from the original release of the game halfway through production due to time constraints. Once we tumbled into the secret entrance to the restored level, we felt pangs of childish glee – you would never know that the Hidden Palace Zone was new; it feels like it's always been there, and you have just been too lax to figure out where it was. There's even a new boss waiting for you at the end of the zone.

It's clear that Whitehead and the Sonic Retro team understand how to fit a Sonic game together; the continued attention to detail is reassuring for long-time fans of the series. Go into the Sound Test menu and all the old cheats work just as well as ever, offering short cuts to Super Sonic for anyone that wants to blast through the game, quick sharp. Between the commendable job of porting the game, the original's enduring design and the catchy, upbeat soundtrack (which has also been remastered), *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* may well be the best game we've downloaded from the Play Store for a good few years.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Android
OTHER FORMATS: iOS
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: In-House
PRICE: £0.69
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN — SONIC CD



WORSE THAN — SONIC THE HEDGEHOG 3

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

FRAME ACADEMY: You wouldn't think a game like *Sonic The Hedgehog 2* would benefit too much from running at 60 frames per second, but believe us when we say it does – it's so silky smooth.


VERDICT 8/10
FAST NOSTALGIA ONLY HINDERED BY TOUCH CONTROLS

Below: The iOS release of *GTA: San Andreas* also includes cloud saves, which is perfect for anyone who wants to switch between the size and convenience of tablet gaming and on-the-go mobile play.





DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Rockstar
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £4.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BACK TO GROVE STREET

Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

When *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* arrived at the end of the PlayStation 2's lifecycle in 2004, Rockstar's crime opus was a pioneering testament to the scale of the medium and the unfathomable capabilities of the creaking hardware of the time. And while it was only a few months ago that *Grand Theft Auto V* achieved a similar feat on current consoles, the developer is once again butting up against the constraints of current technology.

If you've played either of the last two *GTA Anniversary* releases that migrated to mobile platforms in the last couple of years then you know what to expect: a faithful port of the original experience with concessions made to the touch-screen format. However, as each of the original games demonstrated a progression in both size and ambition, there's a noticeable lack of a similar response in the iOS iterations. The first task in *San Andreas* sees protagonist Carl Johnson jump on a bicycle, but such a simple charge is made unbelievably frustrating by the simple lack of grace in the control scheme – for once, the running over of unsuspecting pedestrians was not intentional.

The attempt to translate *San Andreas* to touch-screen controls comes with the best of intentions. After all, it features three modes of input, each offering a passable means of control but lacking the necessary subtleties of a gamepad, particularly when using a phone rather than a tablet. In fact, it almost encourages the use of a compatible device.

But while the insufficiencies of the control scheme highlight the difficulty in bringing a game of this breadth to mobile devices, it does little to diminish many of the original's standout elements. Los Santos as seen in *San Andreas* might just be a crude blueprint bathed in a light mist compared to its recent renovation in *GTA V*, but its streets and the people that run along them still have the capacity to provide dozens of hours of entertainment. Add to that several notable improvements, particularly in the enhanced visuals that update, lighting, draw distance and textures for HD devices, and in the checkpoint system that not only alleviates some of the frustration of difficult spikes in longer missions but makes the game better suited to mobile play.

On the one hand Rockstar has brought *San Andreas* to iOS without compromising on what made enthralled a decade ago. But with a control scheme that can hamper the enjoyment, it creates an unfortunate barrier between the world and the player that's hard to overcome.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

SAVE A LIFE: One of the frustrating design choices of the PS2-era *GTA* games was the lack of checkpoints and Rockstar has remedied the issue in the *San Andreas* iOS release.

GRAND THEFT AUTO III IOS

BETTER THAN





WORSE THAN

GRAND THEFT AUTO V





VERDICT 7/10

AN AWKWARD TRANSLATION OF AN EXCELLENT GAME





Left: Use the wide-eyed helicopters to move Om Nom, the treat and the log around the screen.

Left: The impenetrable tongues form a useful barrier, but timing is always crucial.





THE OM-NOMMER STRIKES BACK

Cut The Rope 2

Om Nom is back and hungrier than ever. If that sentence makes no sense to you whatsoever, then you clearly missed out on the 2010 mobile phenomenon that was *Cut The Rope*. If that is the case, and you're a fan of addictive, quirky little iOS games, go and play it. It's great fun. Then play *Cut the Rope 2* because it's even more fun. In short, train journey-sized doses, that is.

Om Nom is a creature who is desperate for you to feed them the treat that is tantalisingly out of reach, suspended on ropes. Your job is to cut these treat suspenders in an order that plops it straight into Om Nom's waiting mouth.

While you don't need a Newtonian grasp of physics to be able to enjoy this game, you do need to get to grips fairly quickly with how the detaching of one rope affects the others. Many, many times slicing through one causes the treat to veer off in a totally unexpected direction, causing a mournful look to pass over cute Om Nom's face, and that's not a sight you want to see.

The simple swipe to cut a rope rarely misfires and leaves you with a game whose only limitation is your grasp of what the hell happens when you chop the rope underneath a treat secured on the other three sides. The only minor quibble with the game is sometimes when desperately tapping the screen you can accidentally click the 'Restart Level' button, which led to all manner of frustrated sighs.

Additions from *Cut The Rope* include blue blocks that multiply as you click on them, red frog-like creatures whose tongues create an impenetrable barrier and exploding bombs that add an entirely new dimension to the puzzle game.

The missions too are a welcome addition. These missions could be getting a certain point total, only getting two of the three stars or completing a level without the use of an action previously thought as essential. The missions force you to completely reshape your thinking, resulting in a much more satisfying gaming experience.

The sound and the visuals are very cartoony and childlike, but that fits in with the style of the game perfectly. Om Nom is as cute as a hungry blob can be and its cries of disappointment don't get irritating like they so easily could.

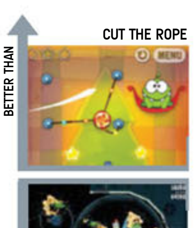
However, if your kids – or anyone inexperienced with microtransactions – get their hands on it, be careful about the in-game purchases, which can prove costly. They aren't essential, though, unless you're a bit wasteful with your free balloons and hints early in the game.

Overall this is a fun game, which has built and improved on its predecessor by keeping the charm and the ability to totally fluke a level while adding new game mechanics and challenges.

DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
ORIGIN: Russia
PUBLISHER: Zeptolab
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £0.69
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN
CUT THE ROPE



WORSE THAN
ANGRY BIRDS STAR WARS

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

MISSION CONTROL: Having two different objectives elongates the game and alters your approach.
NEW FACES: The addition of characters like the bomb gives you more victory options than before.

VERDICT 6/10
FUN FOR A FEW HOURS

HOW LOW CAN YOU GO?

Fate

Originally released back in 2005, *Fate* is a dungeon crawler in the vein of *Diablo* and *Dungeon Siege*, only with a friendlier presentation and a less intimidating learning curve. It's also the brainchild of Travis Baldree, the man who went on to create the successful *Torchlight* series alongside members of the original *Diablo* development team. This means that *Fate* shares many similarities with its more ambitious descendants, not least of which is the ingenious pet system, and while it's hard to recommend this relic over Blizzard and Runic Games' latest achievements, there's still something to be said for hitting the 200th floor with your pet unicorn in-toe.

While it's not uncommon for a dungeon crawler to randomise its many floors, *Fate* takes the idea to the extreme by randomising just about everything. The one part of the story that's set in stone is the name of the central town, Grove. This sleepy hollow sits atop a labyrinthine dungeon that's essentially bottomless, and while the initial objective is to reach around the 50th floor to slay some mythical beast, the name and form that beastie takes is entirely random. The same is also true of the many side-quests that you can accept from Grove's citizens.

In keeping with the game's almost overwhelming open-endedness, character creation and advancement is less scripted and more progressive. There are no archetypes to choose from as each character begins the game as a blank slate. You can then invest your experience points into four basic Attributes in addition to 15 more specialised Skills – ranging from Critical Strike and Hammers to Spell Casting and Charm Magic. This results in a combat system that feels a bit one-dimensional, partly in the sense that the numbers feel very close to the surface and partly in the sense that the melee and magic is lacking in personality. A touch more creativity in this area would have been appreciated.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: WildTangent
DEVELOPER: WildStudios
PRICE: £5.49
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: 800MHz Processor, 512MB RAM, 16MB Graphics Card, 400MB, DirectX 8.0
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



Right: Summon magic is useful early on as it allows you to swarm the sub-bosses with expandable minions while keeping your distance. It's also best to keep your finger hovering over the potion hotkeys, just in case.

FAQs

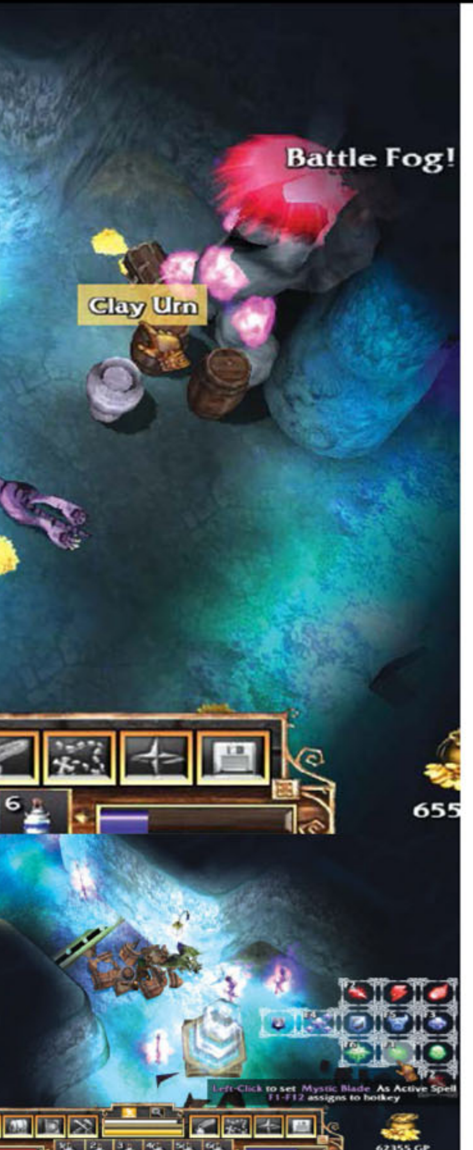
Q. ANY NEW FEATURES?
Outside of the usual Steam bonuses, this is a carbon copy of the original game.

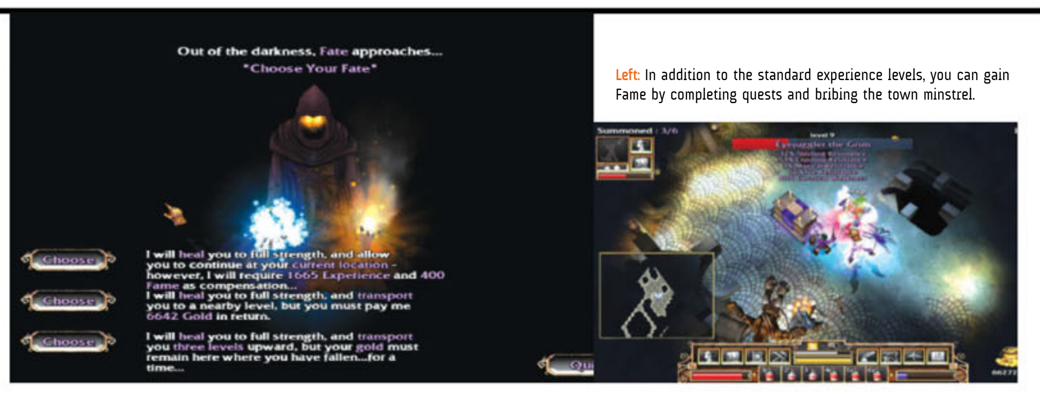
Q. HAS IT BEEN OPTIMISED?
You can increase the resolution to a respectable level, although certain aspect-ratios make the game look stretched.

Q. WHERE'S THE FOX?
That particular pet was added in The Traitor Soul expansion pack, along with a bear and a wasp.



WHILE IT'S NOT UNCOMMON FOR A DUNGEON CRAWLER TO RANDOMISE ITS MANY FLOORS, FATE TAKES THE IDEA TO THE EXTREME





Left: In addition to the standard experience levels, you can gain Fame by completing quests and bribing the town minstrel.



Left: Although the game doesn't feature melee skills outside of whacking an enemy with your chosen weapon, the number of spells is fairly broad. They range from basic projectiles and healing magic to spells that let you summon sword-like phantoms.



FAMILY HEIRLOOM

When you eventually make it to the 50th floor and slay the unspeakable horror that's been upsetting the residents of Grove, you'll be given the opportunity to permanently retire your character and take charge of their descendant. This may seem like a bum deal when you have to trade all you experience levels and enviable loot, but the ancestor starts their adventure with numerous perks and one family heirloom of your choosing. This can be any weapon or piece of equipment in your old character's possession. What's more, every time you retire a character and pass down this heirloom, its magical effects and raw attributes will be enhanced by 25 percent. So make sure you don't sell it by accident.

It seems disingenuous to criticise *Fate* for its plain competency, especially considering its retro standing and the modest price point it originally retailed for, but there are elements of the game's design that haven't aged as gracefully as we might've hoped. Thankfully, the much lauded pet system isn't one of them. You start your adventure by selecting a cat or a dog. This un-killable familiar will aid you in battle and can even make a trip to town while you're still plundering the dungeon's depths. This means you can offload all the weapons and trinkets you've accumulated without returning to the surface.

Considering how much loot the game throws at you, the pets are a welcome convenience that diminish the need to micro-manage your inventory. This helpful attitude is also true of the three-pronged death system. You can either trade some of your experience points to be brought back to life on the spot, exchange some of your gold to be transported to a random (but nearby) floor or give up all your gold to be resurrected three floors up. The third option lets you reclaim your lost earnings if you can make it back to your corpse – similar in principle to *Dark Souls*, but without forcing the issue.

When you're not trading blows with ogres, demons and undead creatures or being caught out by a chest-shaped mimic, the game offers you the chance to relax with a fishing mini-game. Far from the reeling delights of *Sega Bass Fishing* or even the more streamlined approach of *Ocarina Of Time*, fishing in *Fate* is just a case of clicking on the appropriate button once you get a nibble. You don't ever need to bait the hook or change the lure – just like in real fishing! – and far from going down the *Pokémon* route of different-tiered rods, you're stuck with the same pole from start to finish.

This lack of angling variation feels like a missed opportunity. The fatigue that sets in after clearing ten floors in quick succession would have benefitted greatly from some worthwhile downtime, but as it stands, the fishing is just a brain-dead way of gambling your time for some useful loot. Unsurprisingly, the most common thing you'll find on the end of your hook is a fish, but surprisingly, these are mainly used to turn your initially innocuous pet into a more formidable beast. This can be anything from a lowly Tunnel Spider or moderate Dire Wolf to a more formidable Venomous Wyvern or a club-lugging Mountain Ogre.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

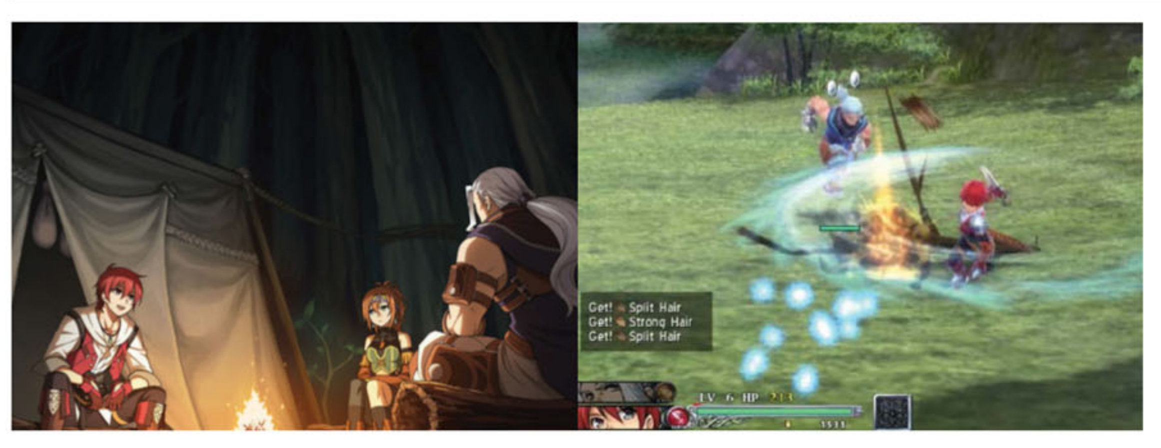
LONE RANGER: The lack of co-operative multiplayer really hurts the game's wider appeal. Even the pet system can't mask the fact that *Fate* can be a fairly lonely experience.

When you take into account the Retirement system that lets you shelve your current character before filling the boots of their descendant, *Fate* is the sort of game you could theoretically play forever. But while this re-release offers the usual Steam benefits, including trading cards and achievements, it's also superseded by its own expansion packs. *Fate: The Traitor Soul*, in particular, upped the stakes by including all the content of the original game and the first expansion pack in addition to a wider range of pets, a new dungeon and even an auto-sort button for the inventory.

The fact that *Fate* was and sadly remains a single-player game, coupled with the fact that you can still download *The Traitor Soul* from the WildTangent website for less than a tenner, makes this a nostalgic venture at best. The original game is still infinitely playable and may even coax a smile or two from those who experienced it in their younger years, but considering the low yet not insignificant asking price, it's hard to recommend this as anything more than a history lesson in dungeon-crawling. If you want to experience the origins of *Torchlight* then be our guest, but otherwise, you may want to hold off till the next fated Steam sale.



A CANDLE IN THE FACE OF A BRIGHTER DESCENDANT



Left: The combat engine is surprisingly robust, allowing you to pull off all manner of impressive moves. There are a large number of skills that can be levelled up, while the ability to quickly change between characters on the fly is a godsend.

CLASSIC RPG UPDATED FOR A NEW GENERATION

Ys: Memories Of Celceta

There are many aspects of *Ys: Memories Of Celceta* that feel incredibly outdated, hardly surprising when you consider it's based on the DNA of a 21-year old SNES game. What *is* surprising however is just how much its developer has done to make it relevant for today's gamer. And if it has put this much effort into *Memories Of Celceta*, we only hope that Nihon Falcom continues with its impressive restoration job.

Memories, like so many other Japanese RPGs, starts off with the lead character suffering from amnesia and awakening in a town that has far too many inhabitants for the number of houses found there. It's an admittedly weak start, but even after an hour of play, you begin to realise that there's more to *Ys* than its age-old clichés. For starters, the combat system is genuinely superb, moving away from random battles to give you complete control. Anything lead character Adol encounters can be tackled or avoided; Adol himself is extremely handy with a sword, having a number of useful skills and abilities – from feints to dashes – that slowly build in power as he levels up and retrieves more of his precious memories.

Combat primarily revolves around three weapon types: Slash, Pierce and Strike, and different enemies are less susceptible to certain attacks, meaning you'll be constantly switching between up to three characters, with the Vita handling the AI of the two you're not using. It's a highly satisfying system that really comes into its own when you encounter *Memories*' huge and varied bosses.

Equally satisfying is the enjoyable, if rather flimsy storyline, and the *Monster Hunter*-style crafting system that can be used to strengthen existing items and weapons and craft new material. Quests are also varied, ranging from typical 'defeat all enemies' to managing shops or milking animals, while the dungeon designs are solid, borrowing ideas and their structure from classic *Zelda* games.

The biggest incentive of *Memories* however is its main plot point, the mapping of Celceta itself. During *Celceta*'s opening you're requested to map the mainly unexplored forest, reporting back to earn gold and trigger plot points. It's a great device, spurring you on to uncover Adol's remaining memories.

The graphics feel a little ropey at times and the lack of a movable camera seems a curious omission, considering the Vita's spare analogue stick, but *Ys: Memories Of Celceta* remains an entertaining and refreshing action RPG. Not bad when you consider its venerable age.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS Vita
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: NIS Europe
DEVELOPER: Nihon Falcom Corporation
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Japan/US: Out now
EU: 21 February
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN: YS: THE OATH IN FELGHANA

WORSE THAN: CHRONO TRIGGER

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

UPDATES A PLENTY: The combat system has been massively overhauled – Adol defeated enemies by running into them – while the graphics have been given a 3D overhaul.

VERDICT 8/10

ANOTHER ESSENTIAL FOR ANY VITA OWNER





Above: While the game engine is a little rough in places, there are still plenty of interesting locations that are packed with imagination and detail.



"I was like 'Oh my God, this is like a film on my PlayStation!'"

DANIEL ROSENFELD, MUSIC PRODUCER

WHY I ♥...

Metal Gear Solid

DANIEL 'C418' ROSENFELD, MUSIC PRODUCER – MINECRAFT

"*People don't like cutscenes in games anymore, but when I was younger and I bought* Metal Gear Solid*. I was like 'Oh my god, this is like a film on my PlayStation! It just keeps on going – I can just keep watching, I might as well grab popcorn and shit!' I just enjoy it – it's like in* Beyond: Two Souls*, it's a really stupid game, but I enjoy it. You don't want a game where everything's one big cutscene, because game design suffers and becomes awful, but if you get a [cinematic heavy game] every three years or so, that's fine with me!*"



RETRO

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The Elder Scrolls
ARENA

BEHIND THE SCENES

THE ELDER SCROLLS: ARENA

Dragon shouts may be all the rage these days, but we talk to The Elder Scrolls co-creator to discover why you should always respect your elders

Released: March 1994
Format: DOS
Publisher: Bethesda Softworks
Developer: In-house
Key Staff: Vijay Lakshman (lead designer), Julian Jensen (lead programmer), Ted Peterson (designer), Eric Heberling (music)

WHEN YOU THINK of Western developed role-playing games, one of the first names that springs to mind is undoubtedly Bethesda. This legendary game studio was founded in 1986 as Bethesda Softworks, and while its initial batch of sports titles were a tad pedestrian, it wasn't long before it was developing games based on popular film licences. This included the first officially licensed *Terminator* game and the NES version of *Home Alone*. Skip forward to the modern day and Bethesda Games Studio is best known for *Fallout 3* and the ever popular *Elder Scrolls* series. But how did Bethesda go from being just another game studio to the role-playing master?

One man who knows better than most is the lead designer of the first *Elder Scrolls* game, Vijay Lakshman. "I'd recently accepted a position as an IT specialist at the American Banking Association when I got a call from Julian," Lakshman explains, when asked about how he first came to work for Bethesda Softworks alongside Julian Jensen, lead programmer on *The Elder Scrolls: Arena*. "It turns out that the résumé I had submitted a month earlier finally got to his desk and he gave me a call. He asked if I would like to be a producer. Having no idea what that was, I of course said, 'Yes!' The rest, shall we say, is history."

The inaugural *Elder Scrolls* game would come soon after, but first Lakshman had to cut his teeth on something less *D&D* and more slam dunk. "My first project was *NCAA: Road To The Final Four*," Lakshman recalls. "It was a project in need of extra hands as Julian was serving as the producer, designer and technical director. Way too much on one plate, yet he was handling it all. I think he got sick of 15 hour days and decided I might be of some use. After that, we worked on all of Bethesda's games, including *Wayne Gretzky Hockey* and *Terminator: 2029*. Each was a learning experience in and of itself."

One thing that stands out about *The Elder Scrolls: Arena* is the unusual subtitle. Where's the sense in using 'Arena' to describe a role-playing game that's set across a whole continent? Simply put, the series didn't begin life as a dungeon crawler, but rather an arena-based combat game where you managed a team of gladiators. "Julian and I loved RPGs, and in particular the stuff out of Origin," Lakshman reminisces. "One day we were sitting outside and I pitched a game based loosely on the Rutger Hauer movie, *Flesh And Blood*. It was about a team of gladiators that travelled around the empire and fought for cash and fame."

"WE THOUGHT WE could create an actual league based on the stuff we'd learned from *Hockey League Simulator*, but with real gladiators fighting," Lakshman continues. "We thought it would be cool to hear about 'Kretos the Dark' off in Mournhold, and have to go recruit him. Combat would take place in pre-set dungeons and be akin to capture the flag, but with death possible. We spent a lot of time on the back-story and world, but had no plot. This was supposed to be a combat-centric game." But in the



Some of the creatures introduced in *Arena* would continue to appear throughout the entire series.



Just like the modern day *Elder Scrolls* games, *Arena* featured a range of different materials. Blades made out of Iron, Steel, Silver and Elven ore were fairly common, but the best mileage per swing came courtesy of Dwarven, Mithril, Adamantium, and Ebony weaponry.

RIDDLE ME THIS

To clear each dungeon and claim the next piece of the staff, you had to solve a cunning riddle



FANG LAIR
What is neither fish nor flesh, feathers nor bone, but still has fingers, and thumbs of its own? What is thy answer, mortal?



LABYRINTHIAN
What force and strength cannot get through, I, with a gentle touch, can do. And many in these twisted halls would stand, were I not, as a friend, at hand.



ELDEN GROVE
My second is performed by my first. And, it is thought, a thief by the marks of my whole, might be caught. What am I?



HALLS OF COLOSSUS
I am twice as old as three times the age of the Sphinx of Gazia, divided by one-ninth the age of the Sphinx of Canus, Igon, who left this world 26 years ago. My age?



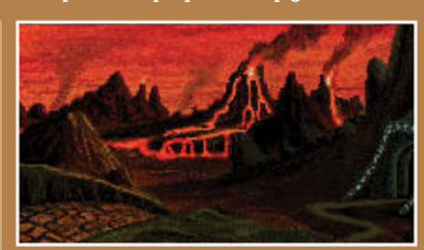
CRYSTAL TOWER
In a marble hall, white as milk, lined with skin as soft as silk. Within a fountain crystal clear, a golden apple, doth appear… What is thy answer?



CRYPT OF HEARTS
There is a thing, which nothing is, yet it has a name. Sometimes tall, sometimes short, and tumbles when we fall. It joins our sport, and plays at every game.



MURKWOOD
I run smoother than any rhyme. I love to fall but cannot climb. I tremble at each breath of air, and yet can heaviest burdens bear. What is thy answer?



DAGOTH-UR
From the beginning of eternity, to the end of time and space, to the beginning of every end, and the end of every place. What am I?

ANSWERS: Fang Lair (glove), Labyrinthian (key), Elden Grove (footsteps), The Halls of Colossus (108), Crystal Tower (egg), Crypt of Hearts (shadow), Murkwood (water), Dagoth-Ur (e)

end, the side-quests became more engaging than the original concept, and so the team ditched the gladiatorial focus.

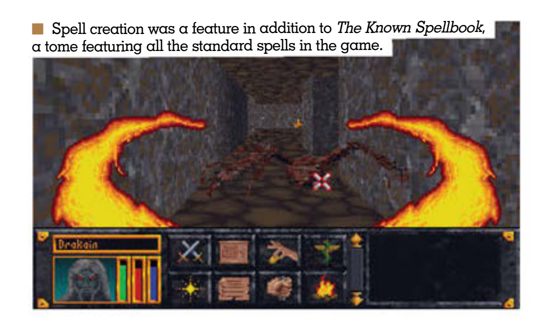
Changing the game plan mid-development would be disastrous for a modern day monster like *Oblivion* or *Skyrim*, but with only a handful of people on the original development team, progress was comparatively easier to manage. "We were about eight to ten awesome and overworked people that maybe grew to 12 at some point," Lakshman reflects. "It was a very small team by today's standards. Ted Peterson was an amazing designer who deserves credit, as do the rest of the people 'in the trenches'. The atmosphere was also awesome. We hated working late, but who's going to complain when you're working at a game company? I loved it."

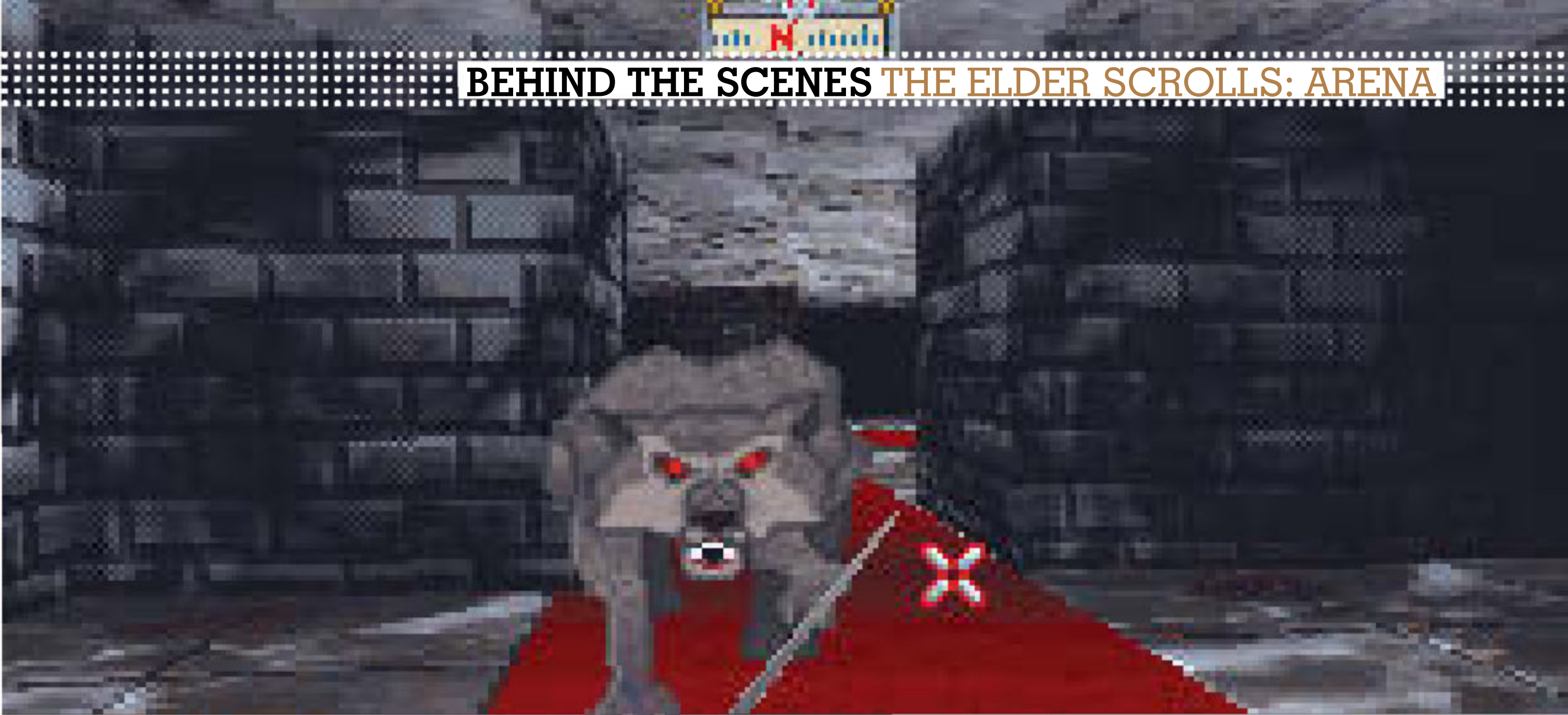
Despite being the inception point for one of the most iconic series in gaming, it's safe to assume that most *Skyrim* players haven't experienced *The Elder Scrolls: Arena*'s story first-hand. The game begins with The Emperor of Tamriel being imprisoned and then impersonated by an Imperial Battle Mage named Jager Tharn, and as a member of the Imperial Guard it's your job to thwart Jager's plans by tracking down all eight pieces of the Staff of Chaos. Each one was hidden in a different province of the *Elder Scrolls* world – including Morrowind and the Summerset Isle – and you had to talk to the right NPCs before discerning its location.

"Honestly, we were super late in development, and then management finally came in and said, 'you have to finish this and ship it'," Lakshman stresses. "We realised that we could bolt on a story, but the questing would be fairly linear. Remember, it was supposed to be a combat-oriented game about gladiators, but AI was difficult, pathing was difficult and we still hadn't solved some of the more interesting features we wanted to do like episodic content. So I spent a month and came up with the story. If you add up all the writing in the original *Elder Scrolls*, it was about five books' worth!"

If the writing was dense enough to cover several novels, then the game world was large enough to fill a continent-sized map. Bethesda was never able to give an exact figure on just how large *Arena* was but the estimate is around 6 million square kilometres. That not only eclipses the 41 square kilometres of *Skyrim*, but it also made the fast travel system an absolute necessity. The reason for this geographical gulf is simple. The main towns and dungeons in *Arena* were manually designed, but once you ventured out into the wilderness of Tamriel, everything was procedurally generated.

Spell creation was a feature in addition to *The Known Spellbook*, a tome featuring all the standard spells in the game.









The most important thing in an RPG, the feeling that there's some great mystery, is obscured by the size and repetitive complexity of the design

PC Zone
March 1994

"ORIGINALLY, WE DIDN'T expect people to play it like an RPG, but rather like a sports game," Lakshman offers, when asked about the randomised landscape. "So after a season you'd want to play again. The only way to do that was to procedurally generate the world and the gladiators, so that we could give each season a unique and fresh feel. The exploration part was relatively easy if you look at it from that angle. What does a gladiator want? Advantage in the next match. Where do you find it? On a monster loot drop. What do you do? Look for random monsters. All in all, it held together well for how it was originally conceived as a combat game."

The scope of Tamriel was one thing, but in terms of giving each province a distinct personality, the thing that really stood out was the eight playable races, which ranged from three human and three elf races to the more exotic Argonians and Khajiit. "I used to love the old *Sinbad* movies and fondly recalled some of the stop-motion creatures they would fight," Lakshman reflects. "For some reason, the word Argonian stuck with me (from *Jason And The Argonauts*) and I equated that to exploration. What's at the farthest reach of your mind and the world? In my mind, there be dragons, hence the Argonians being reptilian."

That explains the humanoid reptiles, but what about the less obvious nod to the Eye of Thundera? "With the Khajiit, I'd spent a lifetime as a practitioner of the martial arts," Lakshman explains. "I've trained for 30 years, was a nationally ranked black belt and competed in over 1,200 combats in the ring. I knew I wanted to make a feline race, and I saw their agility as an intrinsic quality, much like a martial artist. In Japan, the art of the sword is called Kenjitsu. I modified that to become Khajiit, and thus the race of these highly nimble and agile felines was born!" And as the series progressed, the Khajiit became more cat-like in appearance. The deep level of customisation that *Arena* offered was another way in which the game immersed players into its fantasy world. There were 18 in total, and these ranged from the standard Warrior that could wear enchanted plate armour and the Assassin that had the highest chance to land a critical hit, to more exotic classes like the difficult to hit Acrobat and the Nightblade th at could pick locks and cast spells. But out of all the character classes that Lakshman and the team came up with, the most unorthodox was a mage that acted like a living battery.

The Sorcerer class was unique in that it couldn't generate its own spell points automatically. Instead, you had to absorb enemy spells before you could start casting your own repertoire of magic. "I'm an avid reader," Lakshman offers when asked about the Sorcerer's inspiration. "I think I've read over 2,000 fantasy and sci-fi novels to date. One of my favourites is Elric of Melnibone. He had a sword, Stormbringer, which would absorb the life force of his opponents and sometimes his friends. I wanted a class to become the Stormbringer of the *Elder Scrolls* world, and so I made the Sorcerer this living weapon."

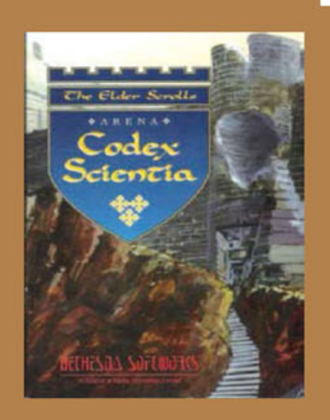
WE REALISED WE COULD BOLT ON A STORY, BUT THE QUESTING WOULD BE FAIRLY LINEAR

Speaking with Laksham, it's clear that he and other members of the development team were fans of fantasy games and literature, and you only need to compare the *Elder Scrolls* mythology to older works like *Warhammer Fantasy* and even *The Lord Of The Rings* to appreciate that a new fantasy world is invariably influenced by the ones that came before it. But when you consider the wealth of RPG staples that the team fused into every aspect of the game's progression system – with everything

DISK AVERSION

■ WHEN *THE ELDER Scrolls: Arena* finally made its way onto the market, gamers were presented with two options. They could opt for the 3.5" version that packaged the game on eight floppy discs, or, if they had a Windows PC with a fancy CD-ROM drive, they could cut out all the disk swapping entirely. The CD version also featured enhanced speech recordings for certain characters in addition to a few CGI videos. And then towards the end of 1994, Bethesda released a Deluxe Edition that came packaged with a patched version of the game on a CD. This bundle also contained the rare *Codex Scientia* tips book and a mouse pad that depicted the map of Tamriel.

To play *The Elder Scrolls: Arena* today, you can either track down an original copy of the game and try your luck with DOSBox, or if you'd rather not scour the depths of eBay for a dog-eared example that may be long past its prime, you can take advantage of Bethesda's generosity and download the original floppy disk version. This was re-released as freeware in 2004 and can be obtained from the official *Elder Scrolls* website. Alternatively, you can buy the recently released *Elder Scrolls Anthology* and play the whole series from start to finish.

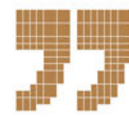






A stunning technological achievement; give this game a better storyline, and you might have the best FRP ever designed

PC Gamer May 1994




■ Instead of a click of the mouse to attack, you had to draw the cursor across the screen while holding down the right mouse button.

from experience levels to customisable spells – it's clear that *Arena*'s primary influence is the grandfather of the RPG itself.

"Anyone who says *Dungeons & Dragons* didn't influence them didn't play *Dungeons & Dragons*," Lakshman states as a matter of fact. "I spent summer after summer with my friends 'geeking' out. We'd play *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Aftermath*, *Paranoia* (thanks Ken Rolston!), *RuneQuest* and pour over combat tables and sheets called Arms Law and Claw Law. The basis of *The Elder Scrolls* was a combination of what we thought worked and what we could implement. Luckily, Julian is sort of a statistical whiz, so he somehow managed to turn my non-mathematical ramblings into useful code." You could almost call it a Carmack and Romero-style relationship.

While the original *Elder Scrolls* team may not have the same industry-wide prestige of the *Doom* creators, what they set in motion less than a year later would become just as successful. And while a lot of that has to do with the timeless *Morrowind* that was led by Todd Howard, many elements of the revered sequels can be traced back to the humble original. "I remember sitting outside in the spring of 1993," Lakshman recalls when asked about the high points of development. "I was figuring out how to create gladiators with real stats that you'd want to recruit, and then how you'd entice them to join you. That was definitely one of my fondest memories."

As steady as the development was, the *Arena* team still encountered its fair share of speed bumps, one of which was a proposed Christmas 1993 release date that had to be pushed back to early 1994. "We hated missing it and I think everyone felt the pressure," Lakshman acknowledges. "You have to remember that Bethesda was a small company back then, maybe 25 people. That said, management left Julian and me alone at the right time. We needed to think, to regroup and put together whatever we could once we knew we wouldn't get all the parts of the gladiator game done. That took real thought and a lot of late nights."

When *Arena* finally made its way onto the shelves of videogame purveyors, complete with gladiatorial box-art that was completely at odds with its dungeon raiding gameplay, reports suggest it was somewhat buggy and initially sold as few as 3,000 copies. "You always think you're ready to launch," Lakshman offers, when asked about the initially slow uptake. "Back then we had small testing budgets and most of the testing was done by me and a small team of high school interns. It was both crazy and inspiring that such a small team could've gotten so much done in a relatively short space of time."


■ This was one of the earliest games to feature a day and night cycle. Once the sun went down on the city streets, the monsters came out to play.

MOST OF THE TESTING WAS DONE BY ME AND A TEAM OF INTERNS

■■■ TO MAKE SURE that all of its hard work wouldn't be at all overlooked, Bethesda released a number of patches in addition to a more stable Deluxe Edition that ironed out most of the bugs. "*The Elder Scrolls* was (and continues to be) a very complex system of statistical generation of appropriate events," Lakshman challenges, when we suggest that old habits die hard. "This kind of game is difficult to test because you simply cannot duplicate every test instance. That being said, this system gives you an open-ended world and allows a player to play infinitely. I think the trade-off has proven to be acceptable by the fans."

Considering the fact that the series has amassed over 25 million sales to date, we have to agree wtih him, and when Lakshman described how far the team went to see the game shipped, our

> A GAMING EVOLUTION

TES: Arena > Might And Magic Book One > Fallout 3



One of the earlier role-playing videogames to utilise a first-person perspective, it also spawned a successful series.



This reimagining of Interplay's post-apocalyptic classic shares a lot in common with Bethesda's original role-playing series.



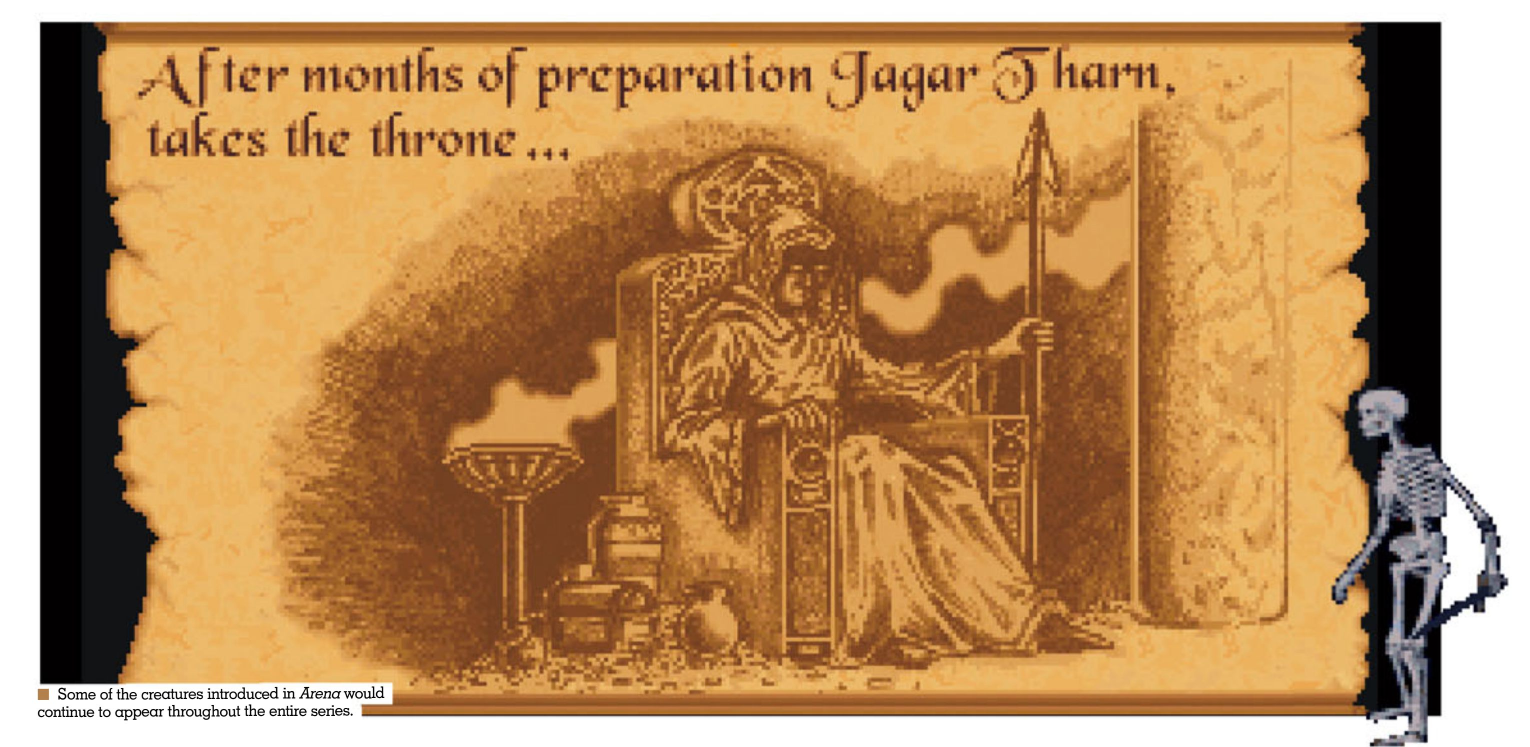
respect was cemented further. "We had a great team of hardworking developers who truly put in their best effort," Lakshman stresses. "No one wore only one hat, and we were all familiar with what everyone did. We even spent time shrink-wrapping the games ourselves, as Bethesda was the publisher and developer. We were in the loading dock and we learned how to assemble boxes, inserts and use the heat gun. Talk about seeing a product through from concept to box wrap! We did it all."

While Lakshman and the team saw *The Elder Scrolls: Arena* through to completion, Bethesda would ultimately turn the series into a chart-topping success. "I love them," Lakshman exclaims, when asked about the modern *Elder Scrolls* games. "The folks at Bethesda kept the franchise alive, poured their resources into it and turned it into a winner. They deserve it. I'm proud that my team could've done so much with so little, but I'm really awed at how much more complex the storylines, technology and adventures have grown, and how artfully woven the franchise has become. I take my hat off to the entire team at Bethesda today."

It's a classy way to end an enlightening discussion about a truly ambitious game. Today, Lakshman and Jensen work on educational software at Naaya, LLC – a studio that is still based in the town of Bethesda in Maryland. Lakshman has just published his first novel, *Mythborn*. The story follows the last seven days of a young assassin's life. Whatever the success of his novel, though, Lakshman can always claim to have started something that holds dear to so many. As far as achievements go, that's a hard one to top.



■ The randomly-generated side-quests ranged from basic deliveries and monster bounties to escorting kings and queens. The best quests, however, allowed you to obtain powerful artefacts. One of the most useful was Auriel's Bow.



■ Some of the creatures introduced in *Arena* would continue to appear throughout the entire series.



BEST BOSS

GOLDENEYE 007

Nintendo 64 [Rare] **1997**

■ SEAN BEAN couldn't have been massively impressed that his likeness was used to create a character that appeared to have Annie Lennox's face wrapped around a pineapple, but nevertheless his villainous Alec Trevelyan is one of the highlights of Rare's seminal N64 shooter. Trevelyan has almost a Jaws-like presence throughout *GoldenEye*'s exceptionally eclectic campaign, the evasive one-time 00-agent emerging for air on several occasions to goad Bond before disappearing once again into the ether. He's a suitably frustrating antagonistic figure, mirroring Bond's uncanny invulnerability to bullets, oversized arsenal and supercilious swagger right until the very end when the nippy bastard is chucked from the top of a colossal satellite. For England? No. This one's for us.


6
110

GAME CHANGERS

STREET FIGHTER II

Released: 1991 **Publisher:** Capcom **Developer:** In-house **System:** Arcade



Such was its immense popularity, Capcom estimated that *Street Fighter II* had been played by over 25 million Americans in just three short years

We take a look at what made Capcom's classic title one of the greatest fighting games of all time

YOSHINORI ONO RECENTLY revealed that a next-gen fighting game from Capcom was still a long way off. This probably explains why it's relying on yet another iteration of its massively successful *Street Fighter IV* to help get it through a financially tough period. In many ways it's amazing that we've even got to a situation where a third update of the now-popular franchise can even exist, because it started off with some of the weakest DNA found in modern gaming.

The original *Street Fighter* was noticeable for one thing: its over-the-top pressure-sensitive buttons, which saw your fighter delivering different strength punches and kicks based on how hard said buttons were pushed. Okay, perhaps we're being slightly hard on it, but if anyone had seen the red-haired Ryu crouch in a corner while an American boxer called Mike ineffectively punched at him until time ran out, they'd be forgiven for thinking that *Street Fighter*'s legacy would begin and end there.

There were clearly good ideas in the original *Street Fighter*, but it would take designer Yoshiki Okamoto, Konami's arcade hits *Time Pilot* and *Gyruss*, and a genuine accident to fully realise them and turn Capcom's second *Street Fighter* into a phenomenal worldwide success.

Street Fighter II took the original DNA of Capcom's *Street Fighter* but built upon it impressively. The combatants once again hailed from all parts of the world, but the design of many of them were far more exotic. From the barrel-like arms of Zangief, to the rubbery limbs of Dhalsim, every single character was notably different. Capcom had already had huge success in the West with *Final Fight*, and wanted to replicate this with *Street Fighter II*. It would do this and then some.

Street Fighter's characters may have had a touch of the strange to them – Blanka, anyone? – but they were also grounded in a crazy sort of hyperreality, and even if you couldn't directly associate with them, they at least felt familiar, being based on stereotypes of their regions. Ken was a brash American obsessed with winning, E. Honda was a rotund sumo wrestler with a Sammo Hung-like speed to him, while Chun-Li (the game's only female character) was a Chinese Interpol agent seeking revenge for her murdered father. Their personas may have been skin-deep, but they were nonetheless recognisable, and they

THE BALLAD OF DIRTY KEN | OTHER GAMES IN THE STREET FIGHTER SERIES



STREET FIGHTER

★ This is where it all began for Capcom's franchise. It's a pretty average fighter that has little going for it. The varied locations and characters were a nice touch, but the actual gameplay is rather sedentary, giving little indication of where the franchise would eventually head. A low-key debut for such a killer franchise.



STREET FIGHTER III

★ There are several iterations of *Street Fighter III*, with *Third Strike* being the version of choice among many players. It's notable for introducing the 'Parry' system to the series, but also for its eclectic range of characters, many of which had odd fighting styles. It was recently updated for digital formats like PSN and XBLA.



STREET FIGHTER IV

★ Capcom reignited the fighting franchise with the fourth official instalment of its now hugely successful franchise. Its release heralded a large number of other fighting games, both from other publishers and Capcom. It's notable for the excellent facial animations and several brand new characters.



ULTRA STREET FIGHTER IV

★ The latest iteration of *Street Fighter* will be out later this year and adds Hugo, Poison, Elveri and Rolento to the already swollen roster of characters. A fifth fighter will also be added, but so far all we know is that she's female. Our bet is that Karin will finally be added.

enabled you to connect with them in a way that the original game never managed.

While these archetypes clearly helped, it was *Street Fighter II*'s stunning visuals, silky-smooth animation and gameplay mechanics that helped secure it a legion of fans. Capcom's brawler was the 14th game to utilise Capcom's CPS-1 technology and the benefits of the new hardware were immediately obvious to anyone who had experienced the original *Street Fighter*.

■■■ Firstly, the character sprites were huge, making the larger fighters like Zangief and E. Honda look incredibly imposing. The backgrounds were also gloriously designed, filled with moving items and people and really capturing the locations that they were based on. But it was the animation where *Street Fighter II* really excelled, though. Watching these fighters as they punched and kicked their way through the tournament was immensely satisfying – especially when they pulled off their special signature moves that were often unique to each character.

STUNNING VISUALS, SMOOTH ANIMATION AND GAMEPLAY MECHANICS HELPED SECURE IT A LEGION OF FANS

KEY FACTS

- Many CP-1 one boards were cannibalised to create more *Street Fighter II* units. It's why games like *Strider* and *Ghouls 'N Ghosts* are harder to find now.
- Balrog is known as M. Bison in Japan, an obvious reference to boxer Mike Tyson. Capcom changed the name in the West to avoid any potential lawsuits with the infamous sporting celebrity.
- *Street Fighter II* was so popular there was even a 1994 movie. Highlights include Jean-Claude Van Damme as Guile, Kylie Minogue as Cammy and the late Raul Julia as M.Bison.

Capcom utilised the same six-button layout for *Street Fighter II* that had featured in its standard *Street Fighter* cabinets. Three for light, medium and heavy punches, the other three for the same strength kicks. It worked exceptionally well and added a surprisingly deep layer of gameplay to what many assumed was a simple one-on-one fighter. Knowing when it was best to leap in with a heavy kick or to try to outpace your opponent with a light punch was critical to success on higher difficulty levels, but it became paramount when battling humans and more pronounced than in the original game.

For many *Street Fighter II* was their introduction to competitive fighting, something that was further compounded with the release of later games in the series. Particularly *Street Fighter II: The New Challengers*, which featured a single-elimination tournament called Tournament Battle that was played in arcades up and down the country. To the uninitiated you were simply pummelling beautiful-looking sprites into submission, but you soon realised upon playing just how deep the game's waters were. Combos were an integral part of this depth, but had happened completely by accident after Capcom noticed you could add additional hits during the punch timing and decided to leave it in. It would go on to become a staple feature in later *Street Fighters* and many other fighting games.

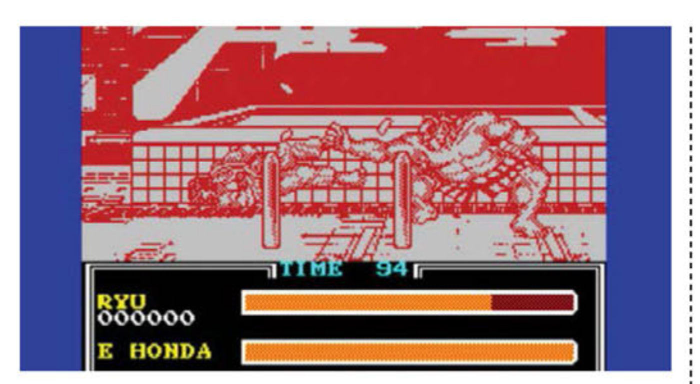
The impact of *Street Fighter II* was immense. It led to a fierce rivalry with arcade competitor SNK – who had hit back with *Fatal Fury* and its *King Of Fighters* franchise – and helped popularise the genre and spawned countless spin-offs and sequels. In fact, no other 2D fighter has ever had the same impact. Not bad when you consider the franchise's less than auspicious start.



GAME CHANGERS

THE KING OF CONVERSIONS?

WE TAKE A LOOK AT A SELECTION OF STREET FIGHTER II CONVERSIONS THAT HAVE BEEN RELEASED OVER THE YEARS. HOW MANY DID YOU PLAY?



ZX SPECTRUM

■ IT'S EASY TO mock this port, but it's technically very impressive. The sprites are huge, well detailed and recognisable. The available stages are also very true to their arcade counterparts. The problems begin when you start playing it. Playing *Street Fighter II* on the Speccy is like watching in slow motion. It's painfully sluggish, even with the screen drastically cut down, and the sound is awful, consisting of naff beeps and bloops.



C64

■ AND HERE'S ANOTHER *Street Fighter II* casualty. The C64 version has tiny sprites and a letterboxed viewing area that kills any impact it might have. It plays a lot better than the Spectrum version, because it runs at a half-decent speed, but that's like saying a dog with two legs runs faster than a dog with one. C64 *Street Fighter II* is still an awful game, one where playability had been sacrificed for a timely Christmas release.



SHARP X68000

■ LIKE MANY ARCADE conversions on this high-end Japanese computer, the Sharp offering is almost identical to the original arcade conversion. But then you'd expect a pretty good home conversion if you'd forked out the equivalent of £2,000 for your computer. Loading times are good for a disc-based game, while the graphics and sound are impressive. Just make sure you've got a six-button pad as it's a nightmare to play on a keyboard.



MASTER SYSTEM

■ THIS VERSION WAS only available in Brazil, being released by TecToy in 1997 – eight years after the 8-bit console was discontinued in Japan. Graphically it's very inconsistent with extremely well detailed backdrops on one stage and empty ones the next, while all the characters are well formed but tiny. The gameplay suffers due to the Master System's two-button setup, but it still manages to play a half-decent game.



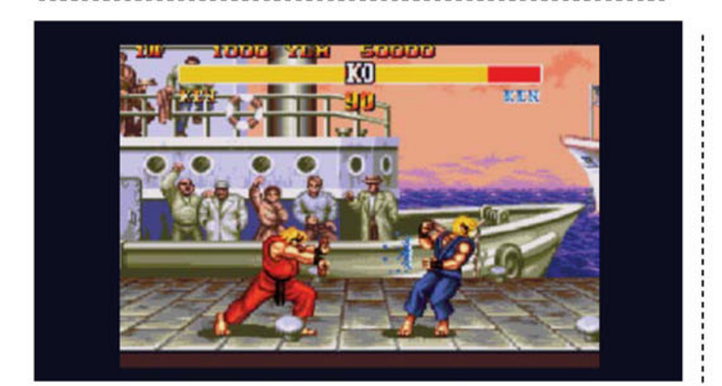
SUPER NES

■ FOR MANY, THIS is the definitive version. It's not as arcade perfect as many reviewers suggested, but it was more than close enough, delivering excellent graphical fidelity and superb controls. The Sharp X68000 is superb in almost all ways (except loading) but considering this is a fraction of the price and reached a far larger audience it's obvious why it draws so much acclaim.



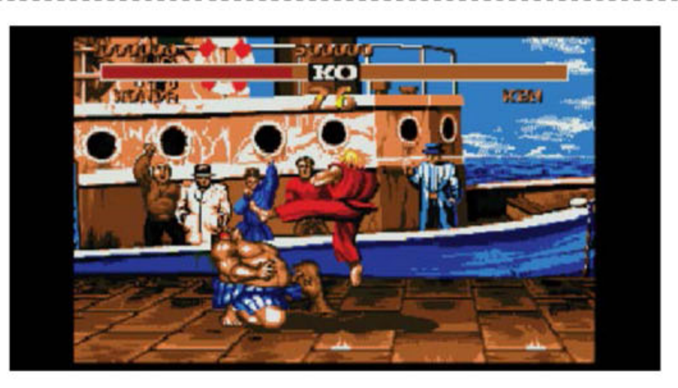
GAME BOY

■ THIS IS ACTUALLY a pretty decent little brawler. Yes it's missing several characters, and yes it suffers from only having two buttons, but the all-important playability has certainly been included. It appears to be based on later editions of the game as three of *Street Fighter II*'s bosses are playable. It's not perfect, but still works better than most of the home computer versions. A fun, if not very accurate version.



MEGA DRIVE

■ ANOTHER SOLID HOME console port, but you needed a six-button pad to get the most out of it. Dubbed as the *Special Champion Edition* it featured the speed boost found in the SNES *Turbo* edition and also enabled you to play as all four bosses. Graphically it's very good with ever so slightly weaker visuals than the SNES game. The animation is also not as good, but there's very little difference between the two versions.



AMIGA/ATARI ST

■ WE CAN'T FIT every home version here, so seeing as these are virtually identical we're including them both. If you pretended *Street Fighter II* never came out on home consoles, you'd be forgiven for thinking these were great ports. You'd be wrong, but forgiven. There's only one button, so many moves are extremely hard to pull off, while the collision detection is pretty terrible.



PC ENGINE

■ ANOTHER SOLID CONSOLE port and another port based on the *Champion Edition* version. It was exclusive to Japan, but was definitely worth importing. It clearly suffered playing on an original pad due to its lack of buttons, but get hold of a six-button pad and there's very little difference between this and the 16-bit console versions. The graphics and speed are easily comparable to the SNES and Mega Drive outings.



DOS

■ LIKE THE OTHER home computer versions, this was developed by Creative Materials. It's also not very good. Despite the power of the machine, it feels worse than the Amiga/ST versions. Collision detection is suspect, while the characters suffer from the same jerky animations of the ST and Amiga versions. It looks authentic enough in screenshots, but once you start playing the average gameplay and poor controls quickly become apparent.







INTERVIEW

CHARLES CECIL

The Broken Sword creator discusses his time working with publishers, profit margins and a myopic car thief

As a student, Charles Cecil started his career writing text adventure games at Arctic Computing for beer money but it wasn't long before the young coder started to carve a niche with his imaginative point-n-click adventures. Regarded as one of the most influential developers of all time, you only need to look at the number of publicly and critically acclaimed titles released by Revolution to understand the indelible impact the industry luminary has had. However, over the years Cecil has faced diminishing fortunes as the industry turned its back on the values of old school design, with his own publisher demonstrating a lack of faith in the genre he'd helped establish. Now, back in the spotlight after the success of *Broken Sword 5*, games™ talks to one of the UK's most important industry figureheads about the shifting sands of the industry, embracing crowd-funding and the possibility of a sequel to *Beneath A Steel Sky*.

How did you first get into game development?

When I left school I thought I wanted to be a mechanical engineer and I went on what's called a special engineering program and very quickly discovered that I was never going to be one of the great engineers. Thankfully, I met up with somebody who'd decided the same thing, and he'd just published a little book disassembling the ROM of the ZX80. He started a little company called Arctic Computing and it just so happens that he wanted me to join them writing some text adventures.

What was the first game that you ever created?

It was a text adventure called *Adventure B*. At the time I'd just watched *Indiana Jones* and I decided to write a game inspired by the film. You'd venture into an Incan cave, a pyramid and so forth. Anyway, the game was really successful, so I wrote another one called *Ship Of Doom*, and another called *Espionage Island*. Before we knew it, it was the mid-Eighties and everything was changing – big American companies like Activision started to dominate.

How did it differ from the games industry as it stands now?

Well, back in those days if we wanted to publish a game based on *Galaxians*, we just called it *ZX Galaxians*, which of course nowadays you'd be sued for. Back then, we knew no better and nobody came after us. From about 1981 to about 1984 it was the most extraordinary time, but then it all changed. Those big American publishers like Activision and some UK publishers like US Gold started licensing games. The whole industry changed – everything became much more licence-driven. It was a real shame. Companies like

> **THE WHOLE INDUSTRY CHANGED – EVERYTHING BECAME MUCH MORE LICENCE-DRIVEN. IT WAS A REAL SHAME**



DEVELOPER COMMENTS

■■■ I once made a fairly controversial statement at the European Computer Trade show. I said that the point-n-click was dead, and in a way I still think I was kind of right because at that time (around about *Broken Sword 3*) there was virtually nobody commissioning adventure games. Looking back, they were very much on their knees. But now, with companies being able to sell and communicate directly to audiences, the adventure is very much popular once again. Just look at the success of TellTale, Daedalic and lots of other great developers who managed to survive through the difficult times.

CHARLES CECIL, DEVELOPER


In Cold Blood was received with mixed reviews, but Charles still stands by it.

Arctic didn't actually go bankrupt for some time, but the rug was effectively pulled from beneath our feet. In the end Arctic started writing software for designing kitchens, and it was at that point I left to join US Gold.

Between US Gold and Activision, you spent three years working on the publishing side of the fence. How would you sum up your experience there?
It was interesting because they were well-organised companies, particularly Activision. The way they did things was totally different and I learned an awful lot, especially about a publisher's expectations. Looking back, it's great having had that opportunity to see it from both sides, because of course now we [Revolution] are publishing our own games.

What was it in 1990 that made you leave Activision to start Revolution?
I'd been thinking of starting a development company when my boss came to me and said 'I'm really sorry, we're going to have to make you redundant, but if you wouldn't mind working three days a week we'd really appreciate it'. I thought 'Great! I can come in for three days, get paid and then set up Revolution with my two free days.'



How much of a lead did you take from games like *King's Quest*?
Strangely Revolution was borne out of the fact that Sierra had this huge market share with pretty ropey adventure games. I certainly admired *King's Quest* from a commercial perspective, but the actual game itself was just nonsense, absolute nonsense. I mean, King Graham of Daventry, really?

So you wanted to create something more entertaining than what was around?
Exactly. It was interesting to hear Tim Schafer say some years back that LucasArts was also founded as a response to Sierra taking itself far too seriously. We'd both identified this gap in the market for a more light-hearted approach and I just knew that the adventure market was ripe for something different. That's sort of how our first game *Lure Of The Temptress* came about.

And that name, where did that come from?
Well, Mirrorsoft's marketing department asked me to come up with some names during development. It was originally called *Vengeance* and I came up with a list of frankly, pretty crappy names to send over. At the bottom, we put "*Lure Of The Temptress*" as a joke, in fact we even put in brackets "This is a joke", and of course, you know what happened next…

Did that name have any bearing on the game before you scribbled it down?
None at all. But they just kept saying, 'it needs to be called *Lure Of The Temptress*'. But the two problems we had were 1) There was no luring, and 2) There was no temptress. You can imagine the inevitable reply, 'Well, cant you put one in?' Bear in mind, this is an adventure game that's pretty much almost finished. So, they gave us some more time to add and rewrite a lot of elements just to work around the name.

We've heard that there was an incident with *Lure Of The Temptress* in a car…
Yes, that's right. We had a big meeting with Mirrorsoft to show the game and we foolishly left the PC – which was massive by the way – in the car overnight. Why we did that, I have no idea. Anyway, someone broke in and stole the car radio but left everything else.

Not too long after that you had great success with *Beneath A Steel Sky*…
We did indeed! Again, *BASS* was made kind of as a reaction to everything else being released at the time. The *King's Quest* series had kind of been replaced by the slapstick of *Monkey Island*, so we decided to go completely the other way with it by creating something really gritty. A lot of credit has to go to Dave Gibbons (*Watchmen*) who drew all of our backgrounds and defined the games style.

So how exactly did the *Broken Sword* series follow on?
Well, you see after the success of *Lure Of The Temptress* and *Beneath A Steel Sky*, Virgin pretty much told us to really push the boat out with our next title and come up with a really high production value adventure game.

How did you intend to 'push the boat out'?
Well we started to get people from various creative industries to



Lure Of The Temptress showcasing a very rich and vibrant pallet, with only sixteen colours (thirty two on the Amiga).

DEVELOPER COMMENTS

"*In Cold Blood* was a very interesting game for Revolution. If you look at the user reviews, it's actually got a very high score despite the fact the interface really let it down. But the people who got past the interface really loved it. You had to play it, and when you played it, its value shone through. But it shone through a rather rugged user interface and some difficult display type decisions, but the same Revolution game was underneath it all. And it was huge as well, it's an absolutely massive game; probably about the same length as three *Broken Swords*."

CHARLES CECIL, DEVELOPER

come on board. The person who really inspired this was a person called Owen Campbell who worked in Dublin at the now-defunct Sullivan Bluth studios. He was a really talented artist who taught me an awful lot about what you can do with perspective and how to create a mood. And then there was a composer called Barrington Pheloung who was also fantastic. It became really fun bringing this wonderful group of creative people together to produce the game.

After the success of the first game, did you come under increased pressure from Virgin with follow-up *The Smoking Mirror*?
The thing is at this point, the industry was changing and Virgin really didn't want to fund this game in the first place. They thought the market was changing so rapidly, and that there was simply no demand for these kinds of adventures anymore. The irony however is that both *Broken Sword 1* and *2* did remarkably well on PlayStation. I think they sold about half a million copies each. It's extraordinary really because we were effectively using the joypad as a virtual mouse. It was a bit rubbish and yet people loved it. That's when it became quite clear that the view of the publishers versus the view of gamers was diverging, and it was that changing view of the publishers that effectively caused adventure games to go so down hill.

How did that have an impact on your future releases?
It made it much harder. Publishers thought that they knew how the adventure game could be re-invented. They wanted visceral, 3D games, because that's what the sea of wisdom said people wanted to play. So when it came to making *Broken Sword 3* and *4*, we had to move things to 3D, because otherwise they wouldn't have been commissioned.



Beneath A Steel Sky – hand drawn (by *Watchmen*'s Dave Gibbons), scanned and then touched them up with e-paint.

Did your situation improve at all?
Not really. Publishers were just not commissioning any adventure games what so ever, and from a development perspective, it frankly got pretty grim. We were writing games – considered by the publishers to be niche – which we were losing money on, as it had become so difficult to get them into retail.

NOW, ALL OF A SUDDEN, BECAUSE OF SELF-PUBLISHING, WE'RE ON A LEVEL PLAYING FIELD WITH THE BIG COMPANIES

How important did the iPhone become in revolutionising the genre in 2007?
It's been huge. Having that capacity to sell directly to gamers is just extraordinary. Don't get me wrong, we'll gladly work with publishers where it's appropriate for our products, but this model has far more benefits to us. Fundamentally, it's just the economics of selling on iTunes. If a game goes through retail, the retailer takes about half of it and then the publisher takes 80% of that half and of the 10% left they take off development costs, the cost of goods, localisation, testing and so forth. So in the end, you recoup very little. Going through Apple, we actually get 70% of the revenue. It's crazy because we can sell for £4 instead of £40 and earn twice as much as we would have done selling at £40. We've effectively moved from earning 7% to 70% overnight. Now, all of a sudden because of self-publishing, we're on a level playing field with the big companies.


Nowadays Telltale is leading the way for point-n-click adventures.

So your latest release is on iOS/Steam: *Broken Sword: The Serpents Curse*. Why did you decide to go down the Kickstarter route for this game?
The thing is, an adventure game is expensive. That's just a fact. It would have been unthinkable two or three years ago to make this game, but after we'd made a bit of profit selling *Broken Sword* and *Beneath A Steel Sky* on iTunes, we put everything into this new game and the prototype. If we'd gone through a publisher they would have funded it, paid their ten percent and deducted the however many millions of pounds. It would have been almost impossible to make a profit, and we would have been back where we started. But now we're in a position where we've spent all the money, but we have a game that's finished and going to turn quite a bit of profit and left us in a really good position for the future.


The *Broken Sword* series, as we know, was Revolution's biggest success and remains extremely popular even today

So will Revolution work on a sequel to *Beneath A Steel Sky*?
Dave and I have talked about a sequel for quite some time. We agreed that we would have to make sure that it was up to date, but we wouldn't want to throw out all those things that people loved. The main problem is where it would go given the way we concluded the original. But the answer is yes, we'd be keen to make a sequel if all the right factors were in place.



THE RETRO GUIDE TO… THE TERMINATOR

The first two Terminator films are two of the most intense action movies ever made. The sequel in particular is responsible for spawning over 20 years of Terminator games that range from terrible cash-ins to forgotten gems…

THE AVALANCHE OF *Terminator* videogames that appeared throughout the Nineties was a knock-on effect of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*'s success. It was perfect videogame material, not only because it featured a mechanised killing machine, but also because it pushed the boundaries of what we had come to expect from CGI. The liquid-metal composition of the T-1000 was immediately cemented as one of the most badass creations in cinema history, and games publishers across the globe were eager to turn the War of the Machines into something that gamers could play on their home hardware.

This led to well over 20 titles, including a pioneering first-person shooter, a forgettable chess simulator, an arcade classic and even a showdown with a certain cybernetic police officer. While many of the officially licensed *Terminator* games were less than stellar, a few notable studios like Bethesda Softworks, Midway, Virgin Games and Paradigm Entertainment managed to turn an otherwise soulless concept into a compelling gameplay experience. It's hard to pick just one *Terminator* game as the standout killer, but if you've never unloaded a full clip into a T-800, you owe it to yourself to bring Skynet offline at least once.



THE TERMINATOR 1990

SYSTEM: DOS

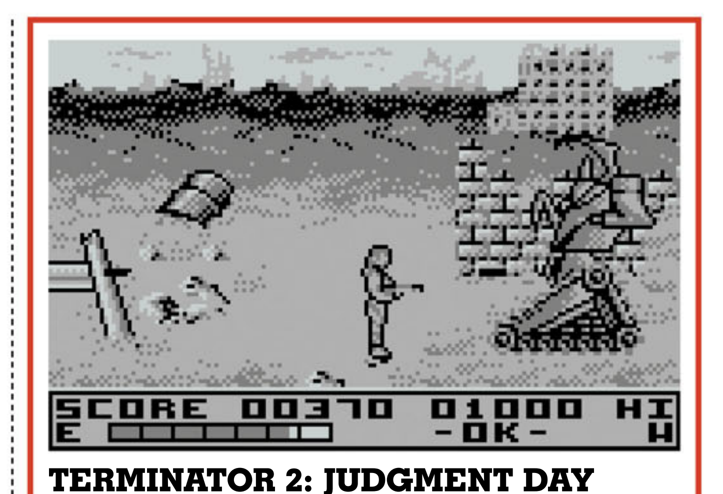
The first officially licensed Terminator game was developed by Bethesda Softworks. It was based on the first film and took the form of a first-person open-world sandbox game. You could play as either Kyle Reese or the T-800 Terminator, with your objective being to protect Sarah Connor or kill her. The game was written from the ground up in assembly language with more than 35,000 lines of code, and while it looks primitive by today's standards, the fact that you could steal weapons and hijack cars within a somewhat accurate reconstruction of central Los Angeles makes this a *Grand Theft Auto*-style game before DMA had even finished *Lemmings*.



TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY 1991

SYSTEM: NES, GAME GEAR, MASTER SYSTEM

Despite the fact that the original film came out in 1984, the earliest wave of *Terminator* games were mostly based on the 1991 sequel. This NES classic was developed by Software Creations, with the follow-up Sega ports handled by Arc Developments. The game spanned five levels with the player taking control of the friendly T-800. The first level had you punching goons while the next saw you trying to outrun the T-1000 across the flood-control channel in the famous motorcycle chase scene.



TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY 1991

SYSTEM: GAME BOY

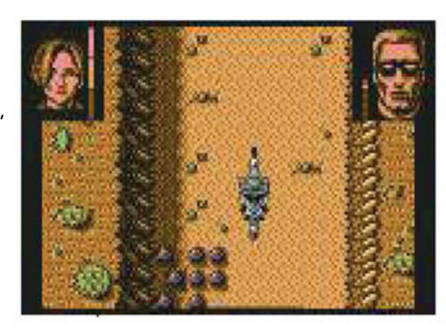
Developed by Bits Studios back in 1991, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* for the Game Boy was a side-scrolling shooter that did a good job of reproducing moments from the big screen onto the little monochrome display. At the beginning of the game, the player took control of John Connor in 2029 as he battled against the machines – including the iconic Hunter Killer aerial fighter – and then once you infiltrated Skynet and tracked down a certain T-800, you had to play through a short hacking mini-game to reprogram its artificial brain.



TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY 1991

SYSTEM: AMIGA, AMSTRAD CPC, ATARI ST, COMMODORE 64, DOS, ZX SPECTRUM

While the console and handheld versions of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* were all decent games in their own right, the home computer version was terrible. Developed by Dementia and published by Ocean Software, the game was divided between short sections. These included a primitive one-on-one fighting game, a top-down *Spy Hunter*-style chase and a simple sliding puzzle. The Amiga, Amstrad CPC, Atari ST and DOS versions looked much the same while the C64 and ZX Spectrum versions were more lacking. It's also possible to complete the game in less than ten minutes.





TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY 1991

SYSTEM: ARCADE

Widely regarded as the best game based on the second film, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* was an arcade gun game developed by Midway for its Y Unit arcade board – the same board that would host the original *Mortal Kombat* a year later. The two machine gun peripherals enabled two players to tackle the T-1000 as a team; or, if one player was feeling particularly ambitious, he or she could man both guns for a double credit playthrough. The game also featured a secondary fire function that unleashed rockets in the future sections and shotgun blasts in the present day.



T2: THE ARCADE GAME 1992-1993

SYSTEM: AMIGA, DOS, GAME BOY, GAME GEAR, MASTER SYSTEM, MEGA DRIVE, SNES

Following the considerable success of the arcade game, the Cheltenham-based Probe Software was brought on board to port the Midway original to a wide variety of consoles. This included the graphically inferior Master System and Game Gear ports in addition to the more capable SNES and Mega Drive versions. These last two featured support for their respective light-gun peripherals, namely the Super Scope and Menacer. Probe Software, the Melbourne studio that was behind *The Way Of The Exploding Fist*, was also responsible for the 1992 Game Boy port. All the other versions arrived the following year.

THE TERMINATOR 1992

SYSTEM: GAME GEAR, MASTER SYSTEM, MEGA DRIVE

After releasing a *Judgment Day* game for just about every gaming platform on the market, publishers switched to the original film for the next wave of *Terminator* titles. First up was *The Terminator* for the Mega Drive, Master System and Game Gear. All versions of the game were handled by Probe Software and took the form of a side-scrolling shooter. The game is remembered for its high difficulty (particularly the first level) and the fact that the Mega Drive version was headed up by David Perry, the man who co-created *Earthworm Jim*.







SKYNET VS THE T-911

We discuss RoboCop versus The Terminator with lead designer Tim Williams

How challenging was it combining these two very distinctive creations into a single game?

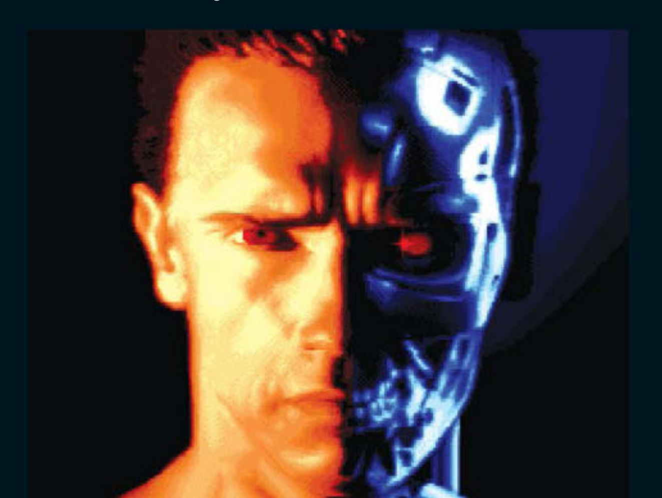
It wasn't that tough because it was the early days of videogames, which simplified some things. It was more about looking at what elements of the licence would work in making this a really fun game. We wanted a great look with diverse environments, and then some intense gameplay with a good number of destructible objects. Partway through the game, we also decided to see how far we could take the violence. We decided to just put it in without asking, and then waited to see if anyone complained. It was around this time *Mortal Kombat* was coming out, so we thought we'd add a slightly tongue-in-cheek version. The over-the-top nature of it garnered more laughs than disgust, so we felt we were safe.

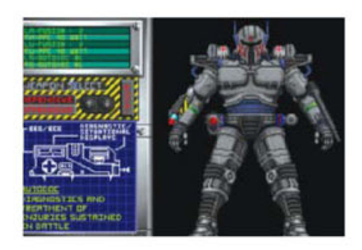
How long did you have to work on the game and what was the team atmosphere like during development? Was it business as usual or did you feel like you were working on something special?

We were a really small team. Just me, the programmer and two or three artists, but we were all very motivated and excited to be working on this. We definitely felt we had something to prove. This was the first real game I'd designed, so I was very excited to get it right, and make the type of game I would want to play. I'd play it over and over obsessively, always thinking there were a few tweaks that could make it better.

What's the most interesting thing you can tell us about the development of *RoboCop Versus The Terminator* that nobody outside of the original development team would know?

I remember the game was good up to a point, but it felt like there was something missing. You'd walk, fire, walk, fire… and that was about it. I started looking at the best arcade games out there. How did the projectiles move? What was the speed and pacing like? They seem like small things, but they made all the difference. RoboCop could duck, jump, move left, move right and climb, so we created projectile sequences that forced him to constantly move about the screen […] I tried to create a design where, if the player had skill, they'd be able to get through a level without getting hit. I always wanted the player to know if they got hit, it was their own fault, and with more practice, they could do better.



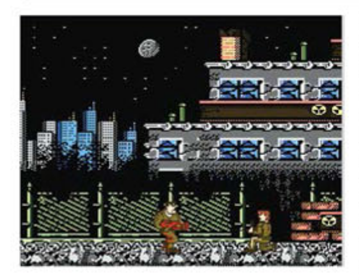




THE TERMINATOR 2029 1992

SYSTEM: DOS

All the *Terminator* games up to this point were directly based on the films, but Bethesda's second robot rodeo, titled *The Terminator 2029*, took a less restricted approach. As a member of John Connor's Special Operations Group, the player took on Skynet head-on with ACE Battle Armour that helped level the playing field between the mechanised forces. Gameplay-wise, *The Terminator 2029* was a first-person shooter that was restricted to grid-based movements. You could turn 90 degrees at a time and each forward movement cleared the same distance.



THE TERMINATOR 1992

SYSTEM: NES

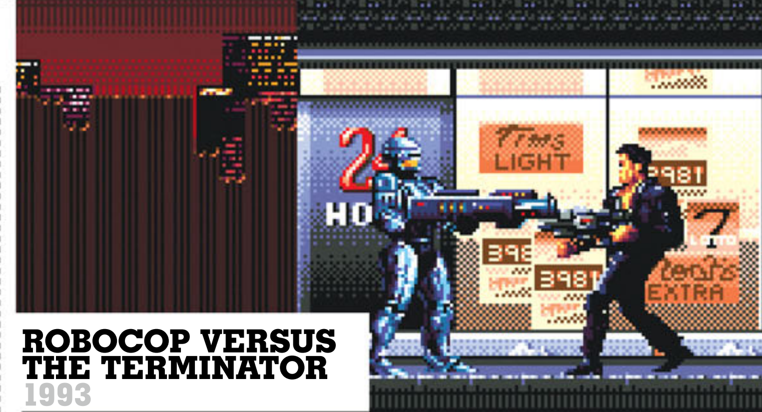
Generally considered to be one of the worst *Terminator* games ever made, Radical Entertainment's take on the original film was a bland platformer with dodgy hit detection and an insufferable soundtrack. The game follows the basic plot of the film as Kyle Reese searches for a time machine so he can save Sarah Connor by travelling back to 1984. Hazards in the game range from water droplets to Terminators, and some levels take the form of a short vehicle chase. Such is the game's notoriety that it was lambasted by the Angry Video Game Nerd in 2009.

THE TERMINATOR 1993

SYSTEM: MEGA-CD

Developed in-house by Virgin Games, *The Terminator* for the Mega-CD took the basic template of the Mega Drive version and refined it into a much better game. Instead of six levels, the game upped the stakes to ten, with everything from the Tech Noir nightclub to the factory finale. The animation of the Terminator and Hunter Killer enemies was top notch, and the enhanced audio capabilities of the Mega-CD were put to good use with a rock-heavy soundtrack. This was scored by Tommy Tallarico, the co-founder of Video Games Live.





ROBOCOP VERSUS THE TERMINATOR 1993

SYSTEM: GAME GEAR, MASTER SYSTEM, MEGA DRIVE, SNES

As well as creating the *Aliens Versus Predator* crossover in 1991, Dark Horse Comics was responsible for *RoboCop Versus The Terminator* in 1992 and even *Aliens Versus Predator Versus The Terminator* in 2000. The *RoboCop* crossover led to a Mega Drive tie-in by Virgin Games. The story centred on Cyberdyne using RoboCop technology to complete the Skynet project, and in terms of gameplay, *RoboCop Versus The Terminator* was an accomplished shooter that acquainted you with the iconic Auto-9 pistol before introducing its own diverse arsenal. The game was also adapted for several other home systems by NMS Software and Interplay Interactive.



TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY CHESS WARS 1993

SYSTEM: DOS

We're not entirely sure why IntraCorp decided to build a chess simulator around the second *Terminator* film, but at least it must have been fairly confident that the core gameplay would stand up to scrutiny. One side played as the humans while the other got to grips with Skynet. So while the human bishop was John Connor on a motorcycle, the Skynet version was a T-1000. Other pieces included Sarah Connor as the Queen, Schwarzenegger as the King, Miles Dyson as the knight and generic soldiers as the pawns.





THE TERMINATOR 1993

SYSTEM: SNES

As with most games based on the first film, the SNES version of *The Terminator* was sublicensed by Bethesda. Gray Matter and Mindscape co-developed the game, but rather than break the mould, it turned out to be another side-scrolling shooter with little in the way of ambition. The game played like a watered-down *Contra*, and despite running on 16-bit hardware, it looked like it was designed for the Master System. The only thing that made the game stand out was a few vehicle moments that looked like they'd been reversed engineered from Batman Returns on the Mega-CD.

THE TERMINATOR 2029: OPERATION SCOUR 1993

SYSTEM: DOS

Following the success of *The Terminator 2029*, Bethesda released an expansion pack that added 12 new missions. It continued the game's story by focusing on a new weapon called The Guardian. This mysterious construct had appeared after Skynet's defeat and was bringing many of its old forces back online. It also introduced a handful of new enemies. These included the Manta, a heavy-assault Hunter Killer.





TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY 1993

SYSTEM: MEGA DRIVE, SNES

After working on *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* for the Game Boy, Bits Studios developed another Terminator game for the Mega Drive and SNES. It was a side-scrolling shooter based on the second film – much as before – but this time the plot followed the movie script more closely. The game featured a hub world where you could ride to different locations, as well as selectable weapons that ranged from a pistol and shotgun to an assault rifle and mini-gun. You also had to watch out for the T-1000 as it would often turn up unexpectedly.



THE TERMINATOR: RAMPAGE 1993

SYSTEM: DOS

Less of a *Doom* clone and more of a *Wolfenstein* wannabe in Cyberdyne clothing, *The Terminator: Rampage* was Bethesda's first stab at an FPS. Skynet sends a copy of itself back to 1984 so it can start Judgment Day earlier and, in a case of 'if it isn't broke don't fix it', John Connor follows suit by sending a lone commando after it. What follows is 32 floors of maze-like banality as you try to piece together the V-TEC Phased Plasma Cannon, the only weapon that could harm Skynet's sinister protégé.

THE TERMINATOR: FUTURE SHOCK 1995

SYSTEM: DOS

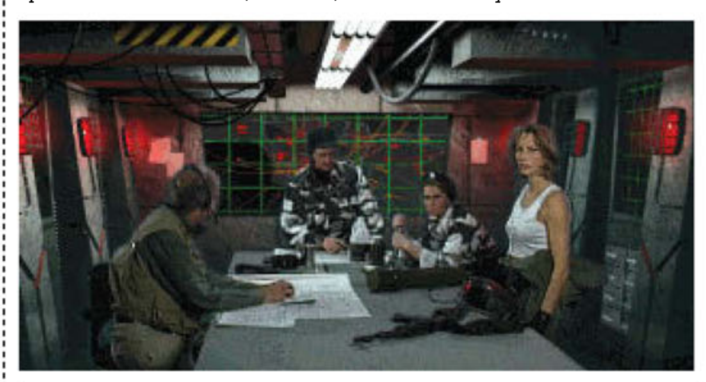
If Bethesda could be accused of stumbling with *Rampage*, then it made up for it with *Future Shock*. The FPS game pioneered a lot of genre conventions – including true 3D environments with full texture mapping and pinpoint mouse aiming. The story took place in 2015 with the player escaping an extermination camp to join the Resistance. You uncovered a plot that involved Skynet using time displacement to teleport its forces – you could even pilot a 4x4 and a Hunter Killer aerial fighter.



SKYNET 1996

SYSTEM: DOS

The last *Terminator* game by Bethesda was a fine-tuning of the template it established with *Future Shock*. Originally planned as an expansion, *SkyNET* became a full-blown sequel with its own story and FMV cut-scenes. This time the story centred on a nuclear weapon that the machines were planning to use on the Resistance, and while the updated Xngine engine allowed for a much higher resolution, the most significant addition was an eight-player deathmatch mode. *Future Shock* and *SkyNET* were also produced by Todd Howard, the same man who spearheaded *Morrowind, Oblivion, Fallout 3* and *Skyrim*.



THE TERMINATOR: DAWN OF FATE 2002

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX

After Bethesda bowed out from the Terminator franchise, it took another six years before the machines rose again. This time it was Paradigm Entertainment with *The Terminator: Dawn Of Fate*, a prequel to the original film that cast the player as Kyle Reese. The story took place before Kyle's time travel antics and featured Resistance members that had been forcibly changed into Skynet Initiates as well as the visual debut of Justin Perry – a Major General who was briefly mentioned in the original film. Unfortunately, the third-person gunplay was average at best.







RISE OF THE ROBOTS

We spoke to former Bethesda Softworks designer and producer Vijay Lakshman about his work on The Terminator 2029

How did you want *The Terminator 2029* to be different to the original DOS game developed by Bethesda Softworks?

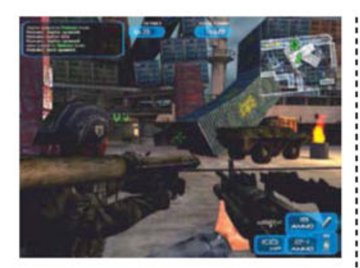
We didn't want people comparing our product to the fabulous movie. We needed all the coolness but also a place where we could stretch our imagination. During that time the team discussed placing it in the future, where there would be more technology and abilities, and then it occurred to us that there must have been a few attempts to send someone back. We decided to use *The Terminator 2029* to explore that story.

***The Terminator 2029* was released in 1992, a year after *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* came out in the cinema. What exactly was it like developing a videogame in the wake of something that was deemed so universally successful?**

Hard, and scary! But the fact that we had put our storyline in the future helped a lot. It gave us a lot of wiggle room to try out new things, and give our audience more about the future that we only saw during the brief movie flash-forwards (or backwards)… ugh, time travel is tough.

The game was set during The War Against The Machines and cast the player as a member of John Connor's Special Operations Group. You then took control of an armoured suit and moved across a grid-based map from the first-person perspective. What was the inspiration behind the ACE Battle Armour and why did you go with a future setting?

I've always been a fan of powered body suits, ever since I read the very first *Iron Man* as a kid. The suit seemed to be the only way a soldier could deal with the awesome might of a Terminator. However, we knew not everyone could have one or Man would have won the war against the machines and not had to send John Connor back… hence, the suit was born!

TERMINATOR 3: RISE OF THE MACHINES 2003

SYSTEM: PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX

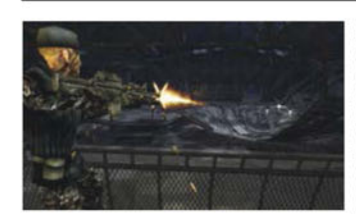
When *Terminator 3: Rise Of The Machines* launched in cinemas back in 2003, it was only a matter of time before a tie-in followed. The developer turned out to be Black Ops Entertainment, the same studio responsible for *Tomorrow Never Dies* on the original PlayStation. The first-person gunplay was fairly mindless and the less said about the side-on fist fights with the T-X, the better. A GameCube version was announced but never materialised. Schwarzenegger also lent his voice to the game after allegedly saying he felt it did the movie justice. He may have a point.



TERMINATOR 3: RISE OF THE MACHINES 2003

SYSTEM: GAME BOY ADVANCE

Atari commissioned Taniko to develop a *Terminator 3: Rise Of The Machines* title for the Game Boy Advance. This turned out to be a fairly inoffensive game that took the form of an isometric shooter. You played across ten levels that each followed the plot of the film (albeit loosely) and in addition to firing weapons and throwing punches, you could activate the red-tinted Terminator vision to do increased damage. The game also used the GBA link cable for two-player co-op and a four-player capture the flag mode.



TERMINATOR 3: WAR OF THE MACHINES 2003

SYSTEM: PC

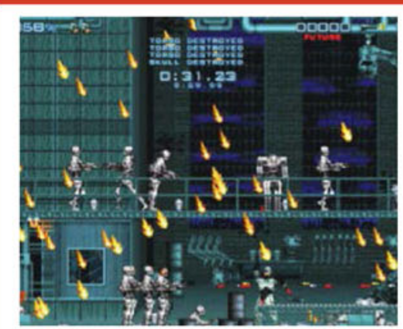
PC gamers experienced *Terminator 3* as an online-centric FPS. *War Of The Machines* was developed by Clever's Games, a Hungarian studio that didn't really live up to its namesake. Players could fight for Tech-Com as a human solider or instead join Skynet as the classic T-800 Infiltrator, the T-900 Heavy or the airborne Hunter Killer Airstrike. The game supported 32 players, but with no dedicated servers to speak of and little in the way of online support, enthusiasm fizzled out fairly quickly.

TERMINATOR 3: THE REDEMPTION 2004

SYSTEM: GAMECUBE, PLAYSTATION 2, XBOX

The Redemption used a combination of third-person shooter and driving game elements to create an open-world experience. The player took control of a Schwarzenegger-styled T-850 responsible for John Connor's death, but after being captured by Katherine Brewster and reprogrammed by Tech-Com, it's sent back in time to change Connor's fate. It's not a classic, but *The Redemption* is the most polished *Terminator* game this side of the millennium.

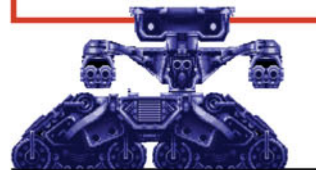




ROBOCOP 2D 2: ROBOCOP VS TERMINATOR 2005

SYSTEM: PC

If you're wondering why you've never heard of this perplexingly named title, it's because it's an unlicensed fan game by Park Productions. As the second part of a trilogy that includes *RoboCop 2D* and *RoboCop 2D 3*, this side-scrolling shooter is set in Los Angeles 2029 and pits RoboCop against the entire Skynet army. The game features music and footage from the original films (again, unlicensed), and while the gameplay and enemy AI is fairly basic, it's free to download from the Park Productions website and would probably run on a ten-year-old laptop.




"IT'S NOT A CLASSIC, BUT THE REDEMPTION IS THE MOST POLISHED TERMINATOR GAME THIS SIDE OF THE MILLENNIUM"

TERMINATOR: SALVATION 2009

SYSTEM: PC, PLAYSTATION 3, XBOX 360

The last *Terminator* game to appear on PC and consoles was none other than *Terminator: Salvation* back in 2009. Developed by the now defunct Grin and published by Warner Bros., this third-person shooter borrowed liberally from the *Gears Of War* template. It was pitched as an interquel that bridged the gap between *Terminator 3: Rise Of The Machines* and *Terminator Salvation*, and while it wasn't a complete car crash, the game is mostly remembered for its briefness, easy achievements and superior iOS counterpart.





TERMINATOR SALVATION 2010

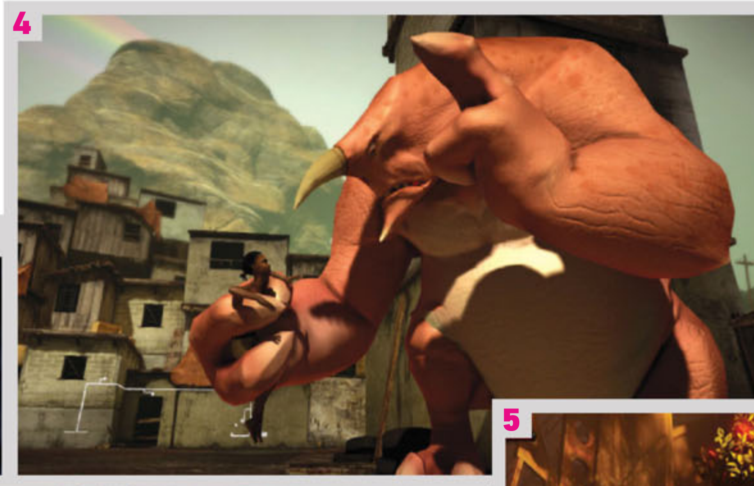
SYSTEM: ARCADE

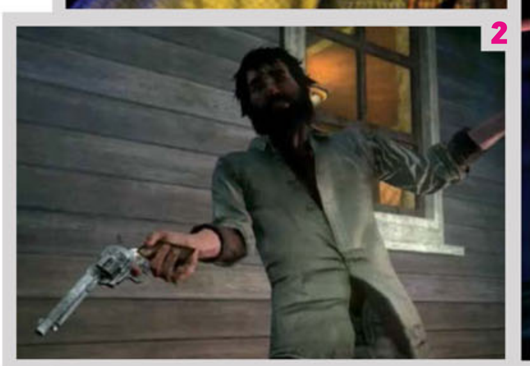
If there's one good thing that came out of the whole *Terminator Salvation* fiasco, it's the arcade game. Developed by Play Mechanix, a company that was founded by the director of the first Terminator arcade game, *Terminator Salvation* put you in the adult boots of John Connor. Using a light gun shaped like an M4A1, the player had to gun down hordes of clunky T-600s, spider-like T-7Ts and two-wheeled Moto-Terminators. You could also change the course of your playthrough by selecting from different missions.

10 GAMING'S TOP 10 DRUNKARDS

Imagine living in a videogame world – with all those zombie viruses wreaking havoc, all those wars breaking out, all those people wanting to kill you… it'd be easy to fall under the influence of alcohol's soothing touch, no? We've searched the vomit-ridden back end of our gaming catalogues to find the most memorable virtual drinkers so you don't have to…









Bo Rai Cho
From: Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance
Release Date: 14 February 2003

1 Maybe living in Earthrealm was enough to turn this Outworlder to drink, or maybe it was the death of his student, Liu Kang, at the hands of Quan Chi and Shang Tsung that drove him to the bottle – either way, *Mortal Kombat*'s Bo Rai Cho loves booze so much, he has become the iconic face of the Drunken Fist style. Problem is, Bo Rai Cho can't really handle his drink all that well. His signature move is throwing up on the floor – not something we would recommend in the middle of mortal combat. Credit to him, though. We never thought we would ever see someone weaponise stomach acid like that…

Irish
From: Red Dead Redemption
Release Date: 21 May 2010

2 Rockstar isn't exactly known for its subtlety, and *Red Dead Redemption*'s 'Irish' adheres to the drunk stereotype. Immigrating to the American West after leaving Ireland, the enigmatic transient calms his nerves and reminds himself of his homeland by remaining perpetually drunk. A bad storyteller (he can't remember the details), a shirker of work (he never wakes up on time) and a coward to the core (he cowers at the sound of gunfire), Irish seems to have settled into a comfortable life as a dysfunctional alcoholic – even if it does give him a somewhat bad reputation among his fellow pioneers.

Auron
From: Final Fantasy X
Release Date: 24 May 2002

3 Never explicitly mentioned in the game, but clearly visible if you're looking for it, Auron's alcohol dependency potentially has a horrific backstory. We know Auron died in his first Pilgrimage with Braska and Jecht, and was found at the foot of Mount Gagazet. The undertones imply that maybe, just maybe, the realisation that Jecht would take Sin's place after his defeat drove the Bushido-abiding guardian to drink, and he drank himself to death on the wintry slopes of the Ronso's homeland. This is, of course, pure speculation, but if true it paints Auron's whole story in a more tragic and depressing light.

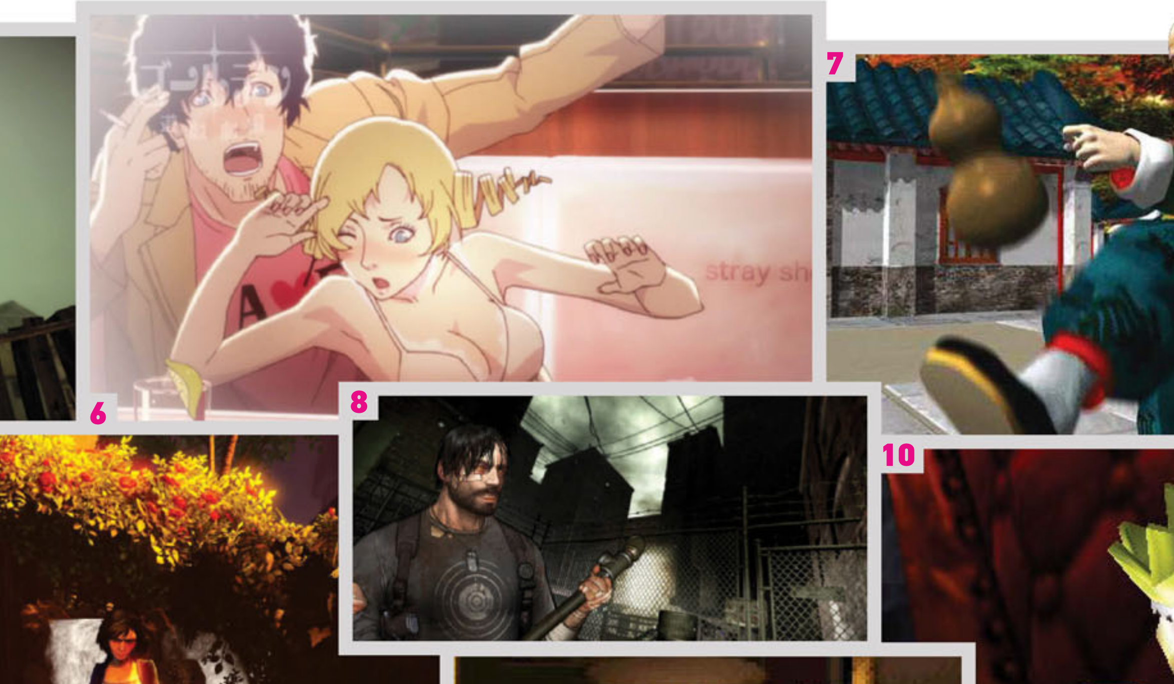
Monster
From: Papo & Yo
Release Date: 14 August 2012

4 *Papo & Yo* is a game about a child that struggles to deal with his father's alcohol addiction, and despite the heavy metaphor with Monster, the realisation that he's alcohol-dependent hits pretty hard. For the whole game, players must keep Monster away from frogs, lest he take one and erupt into a violent, raging beast. Near the end, you discover a pipe that transmogrifies whiskey bottles into frogs, and the whole premise of the game becomes achingly clear. Minority's *Papo & Yo* is a sober and clear-eyed look at alcoholism that makes the other games in this list seem a bit garish in comparison.

Booker DeWitt
From: BioShock Infinite
Release Date: 26 March 2013

5 Not a boozehound by default, but as a player you've got more than enough power to make Booker a bin-sifting desperado always searching out his next snifter of brandy. It seems everyone in *Infinite* has a problem, though – there's alcohol *everywhere*: from the shelves of ransacked shops to the bottoms of bins, the cupboards of the poor to the private bars of the rich, factory floors to baby's cribs. If we had that kind of temptation at every turn, we're fairly certain that we'd fall under the addictive influence of Columbia's ales, too. Especially if the only downside was our peripheral vision getting a bit fuzzy.







Vincent Brooks
From: Catherine
Release Date: 10 February 2012

6 As with Booker, Vincent isn't a frequent boozer at first, but as his life becomes increasingly more complex and his dreams increasing more stressful, you have the option to turn Vincent into a complete alcoholic. When you first arrive at the Stray Sheep bar, you're chilling with your friends, so a drink or two is fine… but when they leave, and you choose to keep Vincent drinking alone? That's when you know you've got a problem. To be fair, though, if we were having lethal night terrors and had the potential to hang around with Lucifer himself at the bar, we'd probably stick around with an extra pint or two at the end of the night as well.

Shun Di
From: Virtua Fighter 2
Release Date: 26 January 1996

7 Another fighting game, another fighter with a penchant for the drunken arts. Shun Di practises drunken kung-fu – it must be something about sages obsessed with fighting tournaments that makes them partial to a tipple. Like Bo Rai Cho, Shun Di travels the land teaching others how to fight, supposedly getting drunk with his students once their training is complete. Shun Di even heard about the World Fighting Tournament one night while out on the lash, deciding to enter on a whim – we wonder if the old guy would have even got involved with the competition if he'd been in more of a responsible frame of mind.

Ethan Thomas
From: Condemned 2: Bloodshot
Release Date: 4 April 2008

8 After seeing and living through some pretty intense madness in the first game, you rejoin *Condemned*'s Ethan Thomas as an alcoholic living on the street, using whiskey to help in forgetting his fall from grace and, assumably, all the people he's killed by this point. Things only get worse for Ethan: his addiction actually comes to affect gameplay – you must constantly drink liquor to steady your hands, otherwise your aim is absolutely awful. At least there's some light at the end of the tunnel: kill the Alcohol Demon, a personal anxiety haunting Ethan, and voilà – you're cured. If only real life were that simple.

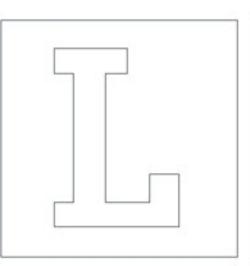
Pirate Leaders
From: The Secret Of Monkey Island
Release Date: 15 October 1990

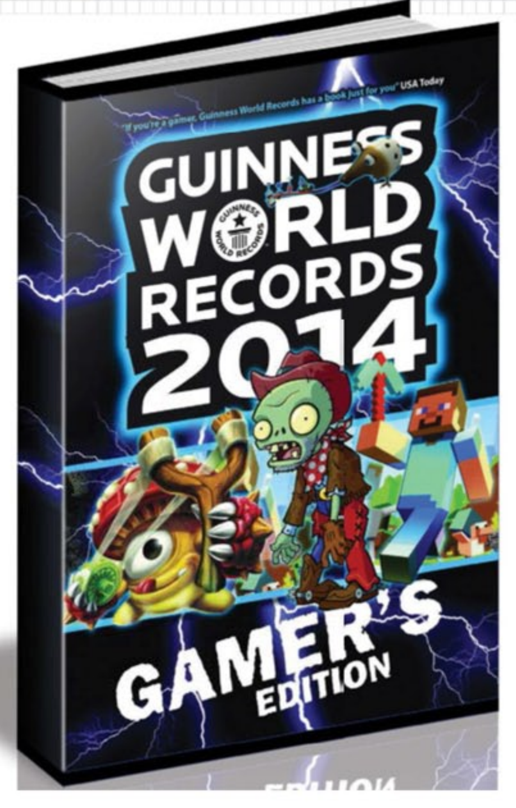
9 You wouldn't think a drink that consisted of diluted rum, flavoured with lime and sugar would make a particularly pleasant drink. Alas, the Pirate Leaders of Monkey Island can't get enough of the corrosive beverage, and happily sit in the Scumm Bar all day and night, knocking glass after glass of the stuff down their throats. Though they send Guybrush Threepwood out on three quests in order to achieve recognised piratehood, one of the Leaders make the only observation that really matters: "To be a pirate," he claims, "ye must be a foul-smelling, grog-swilling pig". Words to live by, right there.

Conker
From: Conker's Bad Fur Day
Release Date: 6 April 2001

10 The Nintendo 64 has long been considered a family-friendly console, right? Odd, then, that Conker the squirrel wound up on there – particularly when he was having such a bad fur day. The lager-loving lout even had a tutorial stage that revolved around him getting sloshed and then relieving himself on some flaming devils, extinguishing them with recycled beer. How this got through the censors, we'll never know. We imagine if this came out in the modern age, consumer reaction would be less forgiving than it was back in 2001, but it was Rare's last N64 game, so we wonder if the developer was that bothered by the censors then.



GUINNESS WORLD RECORDS 2014 GAMER'S EDITION

PUBLISHER: **Guinness World Records Limited** PRICE: **£19.99**

WANT TO KNOW who the fastest person in the world was to complete *Batman: Arkham City*? Well, it was a young man coincidentally named Sean Grayson who saved Gotham in a record two hours, three minutes and 19 seconds. What about the owner of the current highest score on *Angry Birds*? That would be Stephen Kish who snatched the accolade by smashing his way to 37,510 points. Yes, it's that time of year again when the points have been tallied, the stopwatch is ticking and some of the oddest people you'll ever see printed in a major commercial publication come out to play. Fans of useless factoids will be thrilled by the news that Guinness has released its all-new videogame almanac for 2014, stuffed to the brim with trivia, stunts and feats of extraordinary gaming magnificence.

The original *Guinness Book Of World Records* was the type of customary Christmas gift that would warrant a cursory perusal at terrifyingly contorted individuals before being forgotten about for the next 12 months, however the videogame-tailored edition offers a little more value than just a cavalcade of facts and abject imagery. This year's edition includes features on videogame voice actors, not to mention offering advice on how to make money from your gaming habits. The 2014 edition also tries to solve the eternal riddle of what is the greatest videogame of all time, featuring the results of last year's readers' poll.

So if you've got a particular desire to read a book that'll make your gaming skills seem woefully inadequate by comparison, then this is the one for you.



RAZER ADARO

MANUFACTURER: **Razer** PRICE: **£79.99-£199.99**

AFTER ESTABLISHING ITSELF as one of the premium manufacturers of gaming audio equipment, Razer is turning its attention to a new line of headphones designed for personal entertainment. Launching the Adaro series initially with four models – in-Ear, Stereo, Wireless and DJ – we're counting on the new headphones to deliver the same high-quality performance and robust design that has made the company's gaming equipment such a success in the past.

The four models each tailor to specific audio requirements, starting with bass-heavy earphones through to the premium DJ-grade analogue headphones. The wireless bluetooth set stands out, not only boasting the portability and comfort factor for everyday use but also alleviating the ever-expanding cluster of wires when used for gaming indoors. The rub is that the price starts high and gets higher, and while Razer is targeting a broader demographic outside its dedicated gaming userbase it has amassed over the years, it'll need more than a reputation spun by PC purists to compete in the wider marketplace. Nevertheless, the attention to detail and exceptional quality makes it a worthy choice (or at least a hopeful entry on an online wish list) and still one of the top choices for the discerning gamer.

GAMING CLOTHING



SILENT HILL 2 SUNDERLAND JACKET

The protagonist of Konami's *Silent Hill 2* inspires this M65-style military jacket, with plenty of pockets for spare torch batteries.
tinyurl.com/ofrjlao



ASSASSIN'S CREED 4: BLACK FLAG GLOVES

These fingerless gloves emblazoned with the *Assassin's Creed IV* logo are perfect for concealing the commuter's most deadly weapon: the Oyster card.
tinyurl.com/ognphbo



KILLZONE OWL T-SHIRT

Killzone Shadow Fall boasted the unique AI drone OWL, and you can now profess your love for your robo-strigiforme companion.
tinyurl.com/nk2dsvn

72 PINS

MANUFACTURER: **72PINS.COM** PRICE: **$15.00**

IT'S BECOME QUITE an online trend to take a relatively modern example of pop culture and reimagine it as a retro videogame – just look on YouTube and you'll find it to be filled with 8-bit adaptations of *Game Of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad* and even *There Will Be Blood*. 72 Pins has taken the concept further by commissioning a selection of artists to design NES cartridge covers based on a variety of iconic contemporary media, which can be bought for a reasonable price at the 72 Pins website. The range features *Star Wars*, *BioShock* and *The Walking Dead* among others. Some of the artwork available is simply striking and worthy of display in any home.





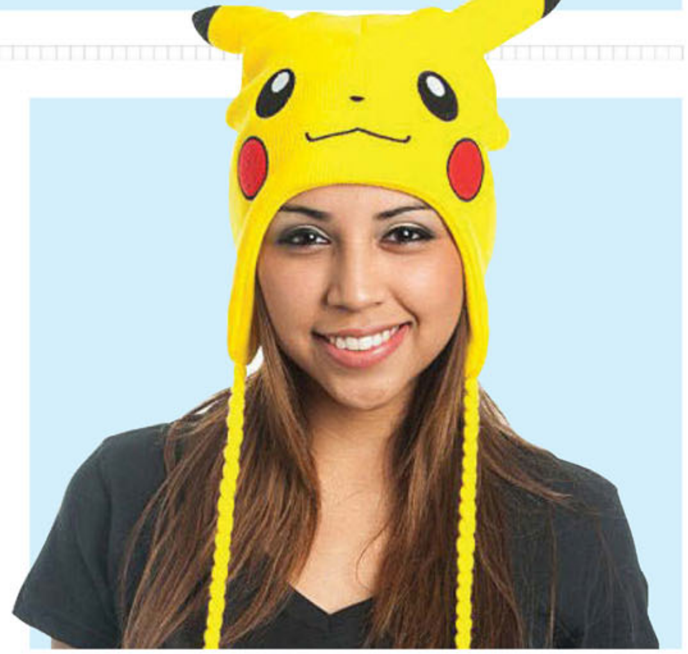




POKÉMON LAPLANDER

RETAILER: **THINKGEEK.COM**
PRICE: **FROM $19.99**

WHILE ASH'S CAP is the go-to headwear accessory that most Poképhiles will proudly brandish, this delightfully colourful Pikachu hat is among the most overt declarations of *Pokémon* fandom that can be purchased. In other words: you'll look like a prat wearing it. Still, with Pikachu's persistently adorable face woven into the fabric of this cosy laplander, it's hard not to warm to its impossible cuteness - just remember kids, if you operate any heavy machinery, make sure you tuck those dangly plaits safely out of the way. You wouldn't want to get them caught in anything.



TETRIS STRESS BLOCKS

RETAILER: **THINKGEEK.COM** PRICE: **$5.99-$9.99**



THE BEGINNING OF a new year is a time always filled with stress, worry and a fair bit of plain old misery. Well, ThinkGeek at least offers some solace in a selection of foam Tetriminos that can be squeezed, punched and thrown around until all the bad in your life is nothing but a small indent resting in an inanimate object. Or you could just buy them in bulk and create your own life-sized version of Alexey Pajitnov's own stress-filled design.


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BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO…
GTA ONLINE
gamesTM hits the daunting streets of Los Santos to bring you the ultimate survival guide to Rockstar's fearsome online battleground



VITAL STATS

YEARS ACTIVE: 0.3

CONCURRENT PLAYERS: 16

MAPS: 1 (Free Roam) Variable (Deathmatch)

CONVERSION RATE: £1 = 50,000 GTA$

SIZE OF WORLD: 100 square miles

GAME MODES: 9

GTA V DAY-ONE SALES: $800 million

NUMBER OF WEAPONS AVAILABLE: 22

VEHICLES AVAILABLE: 200+

Which guide would you like to see tackled next?
Let us know on Twitter or Facebook

BEGINNER'S GUIDE

GTA ONLINE

BASK IN THE WARM LOS SANTAN GLOW OR RIP APART THE DUSTY SPRAWL OF BLAINE COUNTY WITH 15 OTHER PLAYERS. CHAOS, CARNAGE AND JUST ENOUGH COMEDY

The promise of *Grand Theft Auto Online* has been laid out in previous Rockstar games. Obviously, *GTA IV* lets players run riot together in Liberty City, but this was merely a framework – a city without persistence or memory. *Red Dead Redemption* improved this with co-op missions and unscripted events, but its open landscapes lacked the content to really make an impact in the ultra-competitive online world.

Grand Theft Auto Online, though, is different. Here you create a character and build a life; you earn money, buy cars, property and guns, and despite the fleeting nature of some of its missions, you feel like you're making an impact on Los Santos.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the true joy of *GTA Online* comes from your interactions with strangers in Free Roam; protracted helicopter battles over the Del Perro pier, bounty hunts that finish at the top of Mount Chiliad or even a casual head-to-head race from one end of the county to another. *Grand Theft Auto* has always revelled in creating content from chaos, and *GTA Online* amplifies that exponentially.

With a raft of free content incoming, including cooperative heists complete with a planning board, *GTA Online* should run and run. Don't be surprised if it appears on next-gen and PC in 2014.

JOINING THE LOS SANTOS MASSES

GETTING STARTED WITH GTA ONLINE

CREATE A CHARACTER

1 BIZARRELY, GTA ONLINE doesn't offer you a traditional bloke-builder, but instead asks you to choose your lineage from still images of grandparents and then parents. What spawns is normally a plastic looking guy or girl that isn't hugely difficult to make look like you. And remember, it doesn't matter what combination of attire you deck them out in at this stage, as all the shops, barbers and tattoo parlours are open for business as usual in Los Santos and beyond.





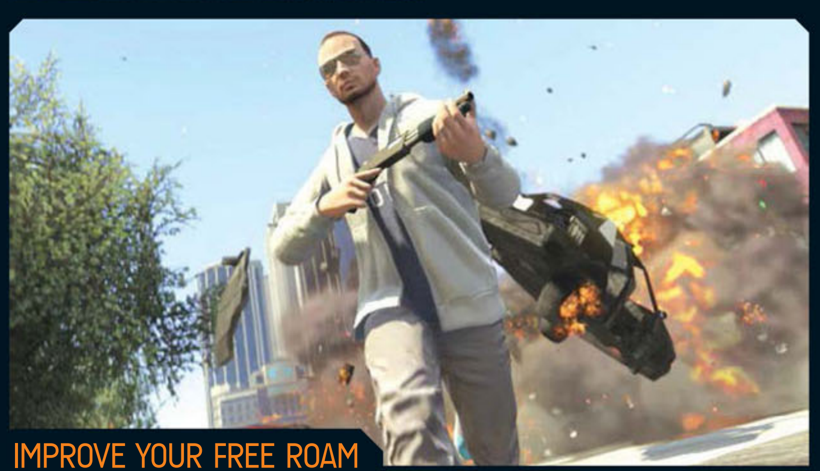


UNDERSTAND THE MISSIONS

2 PROBABLY THE MOST confusing part of *GTA Online* is its mission structure. Dotted around the maps are event markers, which let you play races and deathmatches, but if it's cooperative play you're after, then you're going to need to use your cell phone. Playing missions for the characters who text you is the real way to play *GTA Online*, especially if you're partied up with your buddies. Yes, you can level up quicker by constantly doing races, but this isn't *Need For Speed*. Cooperative theft and murder missions are the real meat of the game's more structured play.

BUY A GARAGE

3 MOST GTA ONLINE players will have received a 'stimulus package' of half a million dollars, so they can buy whatever they please. If you are truly starting from the bottom like Drake so famously uttered though, then getting a small garage is a vital first step. This allows you to store your car, and acts as a spawn point for whenever you start a game. It also gives you access to a mechanic who can drop your motor off to you when you've gone walkabouts.



IMPROVE YOUR FREE ROAM

4 GTA ONLINE DOES a poor job of explaining itself, and initially it feels like the Free Roam mode is lacking in substance. Level up to 20, though, and you'll have unlocked bounty hunting (where you can assign a cash bonus for any player on the map who takes out your target), security vans that can be taken down and spontaneous gang warfare that lets you dive into a battle without having to section yourself off in an instanced mission. The higher level you are, the better Free Roam becomes, so stay on that grind.



PLAY TOP FUN

5 YOU'VE PROBABLY HAD a ton of emergent hilarity by now, but if you want guaranteed laughs, make sure you try the Top Fun mission. Simply put, it's dirtbikes (Sanchez) against fighter jets, with the former trying to race from the top to the bottom of the map before the jets take them out with hellfire. It's both terrifying and hysterical desperately zipping in and out of traffic while the jets roar above you, and it's just as likely to see two planes smash into each other in front of you as it is to get blown up by one.

MINECRAFT: BUILDERS AT WORK

It seems that with each passing week some wonder of the world – whether real or imagined – is recreated in block form. But what is it that compels Minecraft's builder community to whittle away their time transposing vast and imposing creations from one reality to another?

Humans are a clever bunch. Over the years we've built glorious cities of stone, metal and glass, smashed them to bits, rebuilt them again and eventually expanded and linked them together over plains, through forests, across rivers and under mountains. The odd flirtation with extinction aside, our species has pretty much been tinkering in a virtual Creative mode ever since it came down from the trees. Little wonder then that in spite of the noise surrounding most successful videogames, *Minecraft* is quietly closing in on becoming the biggest-selling PC game of all time – with more than 40 million copies across all platforms. Clearly, whether in the real world or a pretend one, people like to make and break stuff.

And what wonderful reconstructions there have been in the five years since *Minecraft* was first released: The Great Pyramids of Giza, Middle-earth's Minas Tirith and a fully explorable USS Enterprise are just some of the more recognisable voxel-based reproductions we've enjoyed in recent years, with ever more impressive structures appearing all the time; not just castles and spaceships, but grand life-size cities intended to fill entire fantasy realms made familiar from movies, TV and games. For Jake Hevican, the motivation to recreate *Pokémon*'s Kanto region in *Minecraft* came about from an abiding affection for the very first games in the long-running series. "I grew up on *Pokémon* and played hundreds of hours in Kanto [so] it seemed like a fitting thing to recreate", he says. "Kanto's design is also very 8-bit, so *Minecraft* seemed like the perfect platform."

In spite of the geographical area, replicating the simple architecture of places like Lavender Town didn't prove to be too much of an obstacle for the nascent builder. "I had a couple of weeks off work and just started mindlessly building on a server I owned and it turned into Pallet Town," he recalls. "It pretty much spiralled from there and I started planning out every route and town." Within two to three months the exteriors were completed. The difficulty then came in decorating the interiors of the buildings and cave systems. This final phase took an estimated 500 hours over many more months before the Kanto Project could be called complete.

While 8-bit worlds can be recreated relatively easily in *Minecraft*; being tile-based and almost always flat, recreating a city or area from something more modern will often prove



Weathertop from Fellowship of the Rings is one of many locations from Middle-earth that Minecraft builders have recreated

"Minecraft is quietly closing in on becoming the biggest-selling PC game of all time – with more than 40 million copies across all platforms. Clearly, people like to make and break stuff"



Sky cities are popular with builders, none more so than Columbia.

Columbia's Gardens of New Eden in block form.



WesterosCraft is one of the most impressive build projects currently being undertaken. Efforts to recreate Middle-earth aren't too shabby either. Hundreds of people online are getting involved.

to be far more challenging, even for more experienced builders. Last year for example we heard about an attempt to recreate the skyward majesty of *BioShock Infinite*'s Columbia city. The project was an ambitious one given the vertical scale and colonial architecture evident in the source material. For the project's creator Tiresh however, efforts to reconstruct Emporia, Finkton and other districts were to be a learning process; a means to progress from having to rely on the limitations of *Minecraft*'s standard issue Creative mode and to try to get to grips with the expanding suite of powerful fan-made world-building tools.

"I felt it would be interesting to have the capability of rebuilding – and to some extent – modifying what needed to be modified," says Tiresh. "Starting a new [*Minecraft*] creation would've been difficult, as I would have had to do the thinking and brainwork myself. Being able to replicate Columbia made things much more fun." In short, while Columbia's iconic landmarks were set in stone, Tiresh could be creative in how the elements of the city and its infrastructure fitted together in a more coherent whole. What he perhaps didn't account for fully was the sheer time-sapping scale of the undertaking, for despite almost three months of continuous effort – followed by six months of exhausting apathy – only a fraction of the sky city was completed. Even so, for what Tiresh calls his "virgin voyage on the sea of world making" the results have made quite an impression.

AS MANY WHO'VE attempted one will know, starting an ambitious *Minecraft* project and completing it are two very different things. While ability can be more than a little helpful, without the proper resources to hand pretty much any project will be doomed to stall. Thankfully there are groups of *Minecraft* builders that have talent and resources in abundance, as evident from the efforts of those who frequent WesterosCraft, a *Minecraft* server on which builders are attempting to recreate the main landmass from *Game Of Thrones*. It's a project to which hundreds have dedicated themselves for more than a year. The entirety of King's Landing, much of the landscape and many other towns are completed, with all of the buildings reportedly build 'by hand' without resorting to any third-party tools. For Aaron Donaghey, the *Minecraft* community expert at server-hosting specialists Multiplay, what the WesterosCraft server



Pokémon's Kanto region in all its 3D glory.



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

IF YOU NEED TO TERRAFORM, DO IT USING ONE OF MINECRAFT'S MANY FAN-MADE APPS

WHILE THE VANILLA Creative mode in the console and touchscreen editions of *Minecraft* allow for some stunning creations, most dedicated builders prefer to work with the PC version of the game. Partly this is because there are thousands of fan servers to which wannabe creators can sign up to, since, of course, more hands make for lighter work. Mostly, however, it's the range of free third-party mods, graphics packs and build tools that the PC version allows for, making the creation process so much easier – especially when it comes to projects like cities and regions. One of *Minecraft*'s most popular tools is MCEdit, which allows users to shape and tweaks maps and then export them easily into the game. There are dozens of others that can be found at: www.tinyurl.com/nzzpkdn



team continues to create is a modern wonder, especially in light of how long and how consistent efforts have been continuing for. Of course there are plenty of other construction crews beavering away quietly in their spare time, some of them able to take their efforts to a whole other level.

"FyreUK and Mithrintia are two teams that really stand out," says Aaron. "FyreUK do absolutely amazing creative builds on a very large scale, they combine this challenge with time-lapse videos in which they gather together dozens of fellow builders and assemble their creations while recording. Mithrintia have more of a game-play focus on their creations and their work features on the large server networks like Hypixel in which literally millions of players have played their maps."

As with all builder communities, both FyreUK and Mithrintia operate servers online, where they invite people to come along and showcase their skills at building and, in time, may work their way up the ranks. Builders spend their free time in there coming up with new creations and once they come up with enough new ideas they can tie it all together in one massive build.

"I imagine at the start for the creators it was simply a hobby or way to express their creativity, but both FyreUK and Mithrintia make *Minecraft* maps professionally now. FyreUK were actually hired by Multiplay to create maps for Minecon 2013," reveals Aaron. "Though the value can't be disclosed, it would likely raise a few eyebrows. They are also employed by the United Nations as Digital Architects. It's a full time job for them now, and one that I still find crazy that it even exists."

FOR SOME OF us it's easy to sneer when viewing the latest sprawling *Minecraft* conurbation, imagining its creator has forgone the pleasure of friends, family and hygiene for months on end with no benefit in doing so, but there are important differences between the virtual builders of today and those who in decades past might have quietly constructed cathedrals out of spent matchsticks, or futuristic space cities out of Lego bricks. Perhaps the most obvious is the speed and scale with which things can be built using *Minecraft* and its suite of fan-made tools. More important however



BEST BUILDS

THERE ARE PLENTY OF EXAMPLES TO CHOOSE FROM, BUT HERE ARE A FEW MINECRAFT CREATIONS THAT BLOW OUR MINDS



SMAUG OVER HOBBITON

BlockFortress is famed for his 3D pixel art, of which this scene of Benedict Cumberbatch in dragon form is the latest piece. Incidentally this was created on the *Minecraft* Middle Earth server where another fantasy realm is rapidly taking shape.
www.mcmiddleearth.com



GOLDENROD CITY

One of the more authentic recreations of a *Pokémon* city we've seen rendered in *Minecraft* blocks and probably more difficult to get right than it looks. As with many *Minecraft* scenes this one has been rendered with a program called Chunky.
www.reddit.com/user/hirotdk



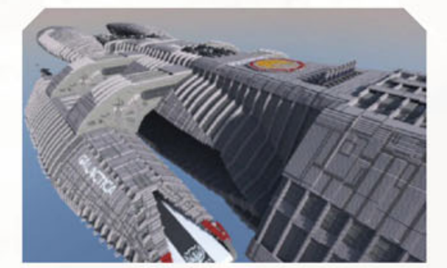
CRAFTING AZEROTH

An attempt to recreate the entirety of *World Of Warcraft*'s Azeroth, combining Kalimdor, the Eastern Kingdoms and the recently added lands of Northrend, Outland and the Great Sea. *Minecraft* and *WOW* make quite an alliance.
www.craftingazeroth.org



SONIC THE HEDGEHOG

This wraparound Green Hill Zone features working launch pads, power-ups, checkpoints and a timer, – testament to the creative power of those clever souls who have mastered the magical properties of redstone.
www.ocddisco.com



BATTLESTAR GALACTICA

Every bit as impressive as the USS Enterprise-D from a couple of years back is this life-size recreation of the mighty Cylon-evading warship. The lifts work and there's even a jump core.
www.planetminecraft.com


The trick is to not be too ambitious if you're just starting out as a builder.


This Columbia is only 10 per cent done and seems likely to remain incomplete - until someone else has a go, that is.


Draping a flag over her arms might be tricky, but *Minecraft* builders usually find a way.


Builders are often very wary of letting strangers onto their servers, for obvious reasons.

"The ability of builders is dependent on what blocks Mojang has in the game; as more block types get added, more creations are possible. I don't think anything is entirely impossible now"
Aaron Donaghey, Multiplay

is the ease with which hundreds of people can work together and not simply share their creations with everyone else around the world, but explore them.

"Sharing is entirely crucial to the *Minecraft* building phenomenon because it's hardwired into us as humans", says Aaron. "Just as kids want to show their parents what they painted at school, [*Minecraft*] builders are able to invite friends to their server and share the experience. I suppose there will also always be the divide of being able to view something virtually as opposed to reality, but with 3D printing becoming more accessible, and services sprouting up that will let you 3D print your creations and have them sent to you directly (like Printcraft), that will change over time."

Aaron has kept a keen professional eye on what *Minecraft* players have been up to generally, as well as collaborating with some of the most respected teams in the building community. While he believes the limits upon what it's possible to create in *Minecraft* are mostly down to players rather than the game itself, he also feels that there are potential developments that could be easily instigated by Mojang that would be welcomed by a great many players, and that could easily push builds to even greater heights.

"The ability of builders is entirely dependent on what blocks Mojang has in the game, as more block types get added, more creations are possible. That said, I don't think anything is entirely impossible now. The one big limitation is being able to have moving blocks. It's possible but it requires a lot of real estate in the game. I think in the future, people will develop plug-ins and add-ons that will allow blocks to be moved in semi real-time in an easy way. This would allow for creations such as giant robots."

It's not hard to imagine the impact there would be on the *Minecraft* building community if it was easier to implement working lifts, drawbridges, moving turrets and the like. Not only could the undeniably impressive recreations of Westeros, Middle-earth, Kanto and Columbia be more interactive, they could become the basis of new gaming experiences in their own rights, in the much the same way as *Quake* modifications of old. You never know, in a couple of years we could be playing *Pokémon Silver* in *Minecraft*. Clever humans!




Somewhere in an alternate universe this is all playable.



Despite being a commercial success, *Diablo III* rubbed a lot of gamers the wrong way. *Reaper Of Souls* is Blizzard trying to right some of the mistakes.

DIABLO III: REAPER OF SOULS

BLIZZARD WORKING TO SOW THE SEED OF CONTENTMENT

An admission needs to be made before we go any further. From day one, it became incredibly clear that *Diablo III* was sat comfortably in the shadow of its predecessor and threatened to never budge. From the endgame-killing auction house to the oppressive always-online DRM; to say *Diablo III* had its fair share of problems would be an understatement, but enough has been said about them to last a generation. *Reaper Of Souls* is Blizzard reaching out to its community with a white flag raised; a genuine attempt to address the surmounting concerns from the players whilst simultaneously trying to breath new life into the misguided granddaddy of dungeon crawlers.

Blizzard is focussing its attention away from the Hellscape and the ghastly array of demons that usually fuel *Diablo*'s oh-so satisfying 'click till your mouse breaks' combat, instead opting to push players into a power struggle against fallen angel Malthael. It's a satisfying shift in tone for sure, and sets up an interesting dynamic for Act V of the epic action-RPG. Of course, a new act isn't the only thing to see in *Reaper Of Souls* – a raise in the game's level cap to 70, rework of the endgame content and the addition of a new character class should do enough to justify the (expensive) entry fee.

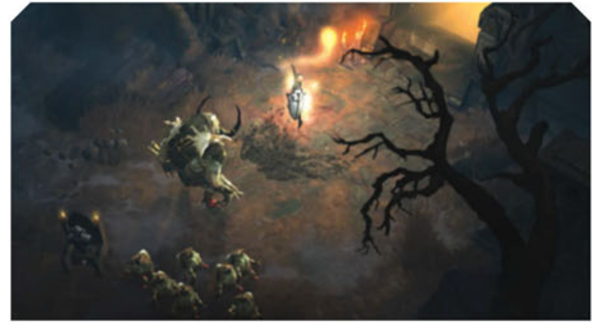
The Crusader class joins the roster of heroes, and while it's been described as "a mid-range melee character" by Blizzard, there's more than a little bit of wizardry hidden behind its heavy iron armour. Old-school *Diablo* fanatics will notice the similarities between the Crusader and *Diablo II*'s Paladin class immediately; but the real fun begins when you start to utilise its wide range of skills and abilities – dishing out righteous holy spells, smacking enemies around with the flail and throwing your entire body into the fray with a deadly belly-flop attack. It doesn't take long to adjust to the Crusader's combat style; it's about carefully managing kill zones as much as anything else – those of you still dipping into *Diablo III* on a regular basis should expect a fairly large shift in your established cooperative groupings.

Some may scoff at the addition of only one new act, and to a certain extent we're with you on that one, but it's the nuance in design that has us withholding judgment until we get our hands on more than the first area. In the opening chapter of Act V, set immediately after Diablo's defeat by your eager efforts, players must rush to retake the city of Westmarch as an army of the undead floods its blue-hued streets with death and decay. We were initially hesitant; Blizzard's attempts at randomised cities haven't traditionally worked out well for the studio – Caldeum Bazaar, anyone? – but new magic in the *Reaper Of Souls* code sees procedurally generated enemies and buildings slot into delicately detailed streets. It's easily a step above the oft-bland environments found in *Diablo III*. A nice touch also sees players transition between indoor and outdoor locations

INFORMATION

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DEVELOPER: **In-house**
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The auction house is being shut down entirely in March, so we expect to see groups grinding for loot again, like the good old days.

"The online auction house is being shut down in March, as Blizzard finally admits it made a mistake"



Reaper Of Souls is introducing a whole new act into *Diablo III*, picking up almost straight after Diablo's corpse hit the ground.

The Crusader takes the best elements of *Diablo II*'s Paladin class and pumps some magic through its veins. Don't expect healing auras though – this is pure damage dealing and control.



without a load-state. It's a small revolution, but shows Blizzard is intent on making the world feel more coherent and engaging than ever before. The other areas also promise to be suitably exciting, especially for those that dig their *Diablo*-lore.

One of the most significant changes coming to *Diablo III*, however, sees the entire loot system being rebalanced. The online auction house, that spoiled a vast proportion of the good times, is being shut down entirely in March as Blizzard finally admits it made a mistake and acts upon it. A free update will go live just before *Reaper Of Souls* hits with an aim to right some wrongs, and it's about time. The Loot 2.0 system will introduce what Blizzard is referring to as 'Smart Drops', that will be tailored to the individual statistics of the looting character – that is to say, the rate of Legendary drops will not only increase, but you're also guaranteed a much-coveted orange item the first time you defeat certain bosses.

Unlike most expansions in the Blizzard pantheon, *Reaper Of Souls* isn't just about adding more *stuff*. This is the studio trying to make amends; issuing a serious rebalancing of the core systems and returning the game to its gothic roots in an attempt to bring back the legacy players left ostracised by *Diablo III*'s vanilla locales. Sure, it's still always online – there's only so much Blizzard can do in one expansion – but the shun of the auction house and second take on itemisation is enough to warrant dusting off your BattleNet account and giving *Diablo III* another chance. The combat is still satisfying, the allure of hunting for new impressive loot is back and, honestly, who would we be if we let some fallen angel swan around undoing all the great work we did kicking *Diablo*'s sorry arse? We imagine a hefty chunk of the 12 million registered *Diablo III* fans will have something to say about *that* come 25 March.



Veteran *Diablo* players will feel vindicated.

MULTI-PLAYING

VIRTUES OF THE NEW PARAGON SYSTEM

DIABLO II WAS always renowned for its seemingly endless replayability, an addictive quality we found to be sorely lacking in *Diablo III*, and Blizzard is doing its best to rectify that. *Reaper Of Souls* is designed to encourage multiple playthroughs through a shift in challenge, and is working to encourage players to try multiple characters. The Paragon system – where you continue to earn stat bonuses and enhanced loot once you hit the level cap – has been expanded to include every character on your account, rather than individual characters. So all that hard work you've put into your level 60 Mage will carry across to your noob-level Crusader. Another notable addition to endgame lets players embark on a randomised 15-minute dungeon with the goal to let you battle your way through a variety of enemies in the hope of scoring new and impressive loot – it should make those multiple playthroughs a little bit more tempting.

ONLINE GUILD CHAT

The most pertinent questions facing online developers today



David Brevik

President and COO, Gazillion Entertainment, Marvel Heroes

games™ talks to company president David Brevik about updates, endgame repetition and the future of Marvel Heroes

You launched in June last year – since then have you timed content drops and updates to coincide with the goings-on in the wider Marvel media, with comic events and movie releases?
Yes, that is correct. We have had many content updates since June. The game has been changed radically. Along with that, we coordinate our events with Marvel. For instance, we released our first Asgard patch when the *Thor 2* movie came out. We also have plans to do coordinated events with the movies that are coming in 2014. But it doesn't end there; we also will be working with Marvel on events in the comic realm this year.

How have hardcore Marvel fans reacted?
Many of our fans are hardcore Marvel fans, so I think they have reacted well. We get many compliments from Marvel fans where they tell us how much they appreciate what we have made.

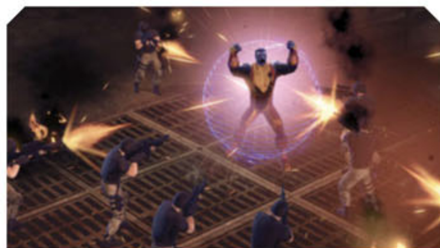
Was the reception to Unique items positive? We thought it was quite ambitious dropping an unknown amount of items in and having players find them for themselves!
The reception was absolutely positive. The community has loved finding the unique items and posting about them. There have been rumours of different Uniques and I love the mystery surrounding the entire list. So much of our information is shared with the community, it is nice to have them search the game and speculate on something fun like Uniques.

> "We will be working with Marvel on events later this year"

The game has been criticised for its endgame repetition – is this something you're keen to address in future updates?
Yes. This was the weakest part of our launch. After the story, there were only a few things to do. Since launch we have added difficulty modes, Midtown, X-Defense, Legendary Quests, new story and PvP. Next month, we will be adding raids. It is an area that we have nearly all of our development focus. Our plans for enhancing the endgame will not change in the near future. We will continue to focus on adding post-story content to the level cap and beyond. That said, we will also be expanding story and having some really neat events in the next few months that will add to the game before the endgame.

Does the choice of who gets a rework come down to community chatter, or is there a more rigid schedule in place?
There is a bit of a master plan when it comes to reworks. We try to choose the ones that fit best in our planning. Each rework gets estimated and some are harder than the others. Each patch-cycle we have a certain amount of man-hours in our pool and we prioritise what needs to get done. Usually there is one big key feature as well as a new hero, sometimes it changes. Then we see what fits best in the reworks with how heavy the big feature is in that patch. So it is a bit random, but there is a science behind it. We also try and coordinate the heroes with other events and costumes and other things that we might have coming up. There is a bit of method to our madness.





One of the most recent updates saw classic Marvel character Ghost Rider join the playable roster of characters.



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